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TYRREL OF THE COW COUNTRY

"Busted nothing!" shouted Welsh
"He's riding him — dammit — he's riding him!"

[*Page 36*]

Tyrrel of the Cow Country

By

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Frontispiece by

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To my friend

EDMUND F. COBB

In remembrance of our pleasant days
together in studio and out on range

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Tyrrel of the Cow Country

CHAPTER I

ROPED

HEAT — the dry baking heat of mid-afternoon in southeastern New Mexico. A sky of crystalline turquoise blue.

The grays and browns of the sun-drenched landscape wavered off to the vague horizon like a robe of soft velvet. The few nearby trees, the grandstand and corrals, the horses and cars and big longhorn Texas steers and all the dense crowd at the rodeo, stood out in vivid glare and shade, as if the sunshine were white-hot moonlight.

Yet Tyrrel, the unknown contestant from Colorado, was probably the only person who noticed the odd *chiaroscuro* of brilliant light and black shadows. He alone of the surging, shouting mob appeared altogether cool and detached.

He did not share the half-savage, half-fearful delight of the spectators over the bulldogging. A steer-throwing contest was all right. Such work punchers must know how to do well. Out on the range cattle had to be thrown and hog-tied for branding.

Contest riding of outlaws was also in line with the calling of a cowboy. Broncho-busters were necessary on the open range where riders could not wait for horses to be gentled. But bulldogging required less skill and nerve than riding a really bad outlaw, and it served no useful purpose in the life of a top rider. It was needless brutality.

The seventh bulldogger threw his steer almost in record time. The wild burst of yells and cheers failed to stir Tyrrel. He was eyeing the next contestant. The man's coarse boar-like face showed too much dark red. He lurched as he stepped forward to mount.

Tyrrel quietly shifted around to the off side of Ante, his big-boned, fleabitten gray. His own turn was near. It was natural for him to look over his horse and test the cinch. No one noticed him unbuckle the strap that held his coiled rope.

He shifted back around to the near side, rubbing the gray's ugly Roman nose and patting the scraggy neck under the scant mane.

Ante's strong point was not beauty. The cowboys nearby had grinningly dubbed him "Slouch" and "Bones" and "Rat-Tail." Keen judges of horseflesh as they were, few among them — so long as he stood slouching at rest — saw more than his scrubby mane and tail, his ewe neck and chuckle head and big out-sticking bones. Yet a second glance should have shown them that the down-curve of the neck was due to the height of the withers, and that the forelegs owed their deceptive appearance of shortness to the great depth of chest and forebody.

Behind the saddle the beast's flanks and belly gantered in as if he had just come through a hard winter. A bag of grain, placed on his sharply sloped hindquarters, would have slipped down over the ratty low-set tail. A horse built aft on the plan of a Russian wolfhound with swollen joints, could not expect to win blue ribbons for form.

Tyrrel had given no heed to the raillery of his fellows. He knew his horse. And now he had something else to rivet his attention. As the flushed-faced contestant rode out upon the dusty sod of the "arena" a more than usually wild steer was loosed from the chute.

The manner in which the half-drunken bulldogger drove at his prize proved him an old hand at the game. He shot alongside and made the jump to the steer's back with a reckless daring that won yells from the crowd. No less skilfully, he lurched forward to grip the horns and somersault down over the head of the bellowing beast.

Bootleg whiskey is a bad bracer for feats of strength and skill. As the bulldogger thudded to the ground, the steer gave a wrench that broke the grip of one hand. A sideward plunge and jump jerked free the other horn. Tail up and head down, the steer lunged past the defeated man, ripping open his chaps from thigh to knee. But, with drunkard's luck, the bulldogger happened to be rolling away. The tip of the horn barely scratched his leg.

Forewarned by what he had seen of the man's condition, Tyrrel "got the jump" on even the mounted guards whose duty it was to be alert for just such emergencies. As he whipped into his saddle, Ante leaped with the suddenness of an Indian racing pony.

The steer did not circle. Maddened by fear and rage, he dashed straight ahead for the crowd-packed border of the big arena, opposite the grandstand. As usual, the front rows of spectators consisted for the most part of women and children. Several women held babies in their arms. From all sides came screams and yells.

The guards raced to head off the wild runaway, swinging their ropes and digging in their spurs. The screaming women and children in line with the steer's mad charge struggled frantically to surge back and aside, out of his way. But the jam of the crowd behind was too dense for quick movement. The steer hurled towards them at top speed — a living catapult — more than half a ton of solid bone and muscle, driven by panic fury.

Only one of the ropers seemed anywhere near enough to

spur his horse within reach in time. The yells of the more distant onlookers choked into a hush of horror that waited the crash of the steer into the milling crowd.

Two men, both afoot, burst out from amongst the screeching women and children — one a small baldheaded man dressed like a banker or merchant, the other a big fellow in a pink silk shirt and immaculate white Angora chaps. Both jumped in front of the charging steer.

From the left the nearest guard cast his rope — and missed. Off to the right the big-boned Ante was coming aslant the crowd in a terrific burst of speed. But he was still two lengths farther away than the guard. The breathless mob looked to see the steer smash over the two men. Then would come the turn of the children.

At the extreme length of his rope, Tyrrel cast with a loop so small that the slightest mis-aim would have meant failure . . . . the loop dropped over the horns of the steer.

Ante sat down, with his forehoofs plowing up the sod. Snubbed by the taut rope, the steer thudded over on his side as if shot through the brain. Before he could recover from the stunning shock, three guards dashed up and noosed his legs.

Tyrrel shook loose his rope and quietly started to coil it in. Ante had already gotten up off his haunches. He slouched and sagged his head as if disposed to take a nap.

The small man in city clothes came around the steer, wiping his bald head with a spotless linen handkerchief. His gray eyes peered shrewdly up through their shell-rimmed spectacles into the cool, ruddy brown eyes of Tyrrel.

"Boy, you can rope."

"Lucky throw, sir. A length too far away. Had to take the chance, though."

The baldheaded man smiled genially and held up a gold-mounted cigar case. Tyrrel took out one of the long

Havanas, reclosed the case, and reached it down.

"No, keep it — case and all, boy."

"Thanks, I'm not dude-wrangling," said Tyrrel.

"You don't understand, cowboy. We were in that nearest car——"

"It's not a flivver — large enough to've stopped him. Of course, though, he might have mussed it up a bit."

"I said, you don't understand. My sister and ward are in the car — there she is now."

A vigorous young woman in severe motoring costume had pushed out of the crowd. She spoke to the man in the pink shirt, glanced indifferently at the outstretched steer, and lifted her gauntleted hand in a beckoning gesture.

Though the sign was meant for her brother, Tyrrel saw her imperious glance fix upon himself. There was nothing of prettiness in the beauty of her richly colored face. The straight brows and rather large mouth, the firm round chin and finely moulded nose, all told of strength and will.

Tyrrel put back the cigar that he had taken out, and thrust the case into the reluctant hand of the girl's brother.

"Too good a smoke to burn in a hurry, sir, and I don't want it to get mashed," he explained. "I'll take it after the riding, if you don't mind. Better move. They're giving the steer slack."

"Very well. I'll see you, then, after the riding. I'm Donald Keith of the Kay Kay."

With another wipe at his bald head, Keith dodged between the guards and under one of the slackened ropes that held the up-plunging steer. The big pink-shirted man swung past him, the long white wool of his chaps waving with the hurriedness of his stride.

"I'm going to show them how to bulldog this wild one of Butch's, Don," he said. "Get Gerda back, if you can. The crazy cuss may bust loose again 'fore I get my crack at him."

The steer emphasized this statement by a vicious lunge towards one of his captors. The tautened ropes of the others stopped him none too soon.

Keith hastened to where his sister was holding out an immense, silver-banded, high-peaked sombrero.

"Put it on quick, Donnie. You'll get another stroke," she ordered.

He gave the wet sponge in the double crown a quick squeeze and clapped the sombrero upon his bald dome. With it on, he looked no older than his three-and-thirty years. He grasped his sister's arm.

"You heard Mat. Come back to the car."

The steer made another rush, this time towards the outer guard. The others followed, so that the plunging, bellowing beast shifted himself out towards the center of the contest ground and saved his captors the trouble of dragging him.

Gerda Keith shook off her brother's hand.

"It's a better view from here, Donnie. Go and chaperon Pilar if you like. Two to one, Mat downs him in record time — or better."

Keith resignedly swung around beside her.

"What makes you think Mat may break the record?"

The girl's keen glance turned to where Tyrrel was backing Ante in among the horses of the other contestants.

"Oh, I told him that toss of the rope was the prettiest I ever saw. Someone said the boy is Dick Tyrrel of Colorado. He's entered for all the men's events. Of course Mat is hot now to show him up. That's why he demanded this rampaging steer."

Keith looked grave.

"The boy saved all these women and youngsters from being trampled, Gerda. For decency's sake, don't set Mat on him."

"Why blame me?" The girl's gray-green eyes glinted and sparkled. "If Tyrrel is a real contestant, and not a four-

flusher, he'll not mind. Look! There goes Mat."

The guards had shaken their ropes free from the steer's legs. They were spurring off in three directions. The maddened beast snorted and charged after the nearest man. Big Mat dashed at him on a nimble cowpony. He swept alongside. With the quickness of a bear, he jumped the steer, flung himself over forward, and threw his beast.

Yells split the air when the timers announced that Mr. Welsh of the Kay Kay had broken the local record by half a second.

He left his pony at the horse corral with a Kay Kay wrangler, and skirted along the front of the crowd towards the Keiths, carelessly slapping the dusty wool of his Angora chaps with his gloves. Gerda's rather condescending smile of approval brought a glow into his cold blue eyes and softened the grimness of his full, strong, thin-lipped face.

"Might be worse," she said. "You've made a record — the new record — unless Colorado goes you one better."

"No chance of that," put in Keith. "The boy isn't built for bulldogging. Mat is."

If the statement covered a double meaning, Welsh failed to catch it. He ranged himself alongside the girl and faced the open.

"You're dead right, Don," he said. "Colorow will drag. I've got him beat now, and when it comes to the riding and hog-tying he won't have a show."

"*Quien sabe? Sabe Dios*," remarked Keith.

But the words were murmured, not spoken. Welsh had bought into the Kay Kay at the spring round-up, and he had proved himself a first-rate young cowman.

The announcer gave Tyrrel of Colorado as last man on the list of bulldoggers.

Ante made a dash that displayed the power and swiftness of his ugly frame. Tyrrel jumped even quicker than had

Welsh. But he lacked the cowman's weight. What counted still more against him he also lacked a certain trait possessed by Welsh — the one that links the nature of a born bulldogger to that of the dog from which the sport is named. He lost first place by exactly the difference between the old record and the new one.

"Told you I'd show him up," said Welsh. "Second money for him."

"He has a horse though," chuckled Gerda. "Bet you a hundred, the pair take first money on the tying."

"I'll cover that with two hundred, pard," said Welsh. "Let's go eat. Nothing worth while left for today."

Keith lingered to look around for Tyrrel. He had not forgotten the returned cigar. But the Coloradoan was nowhere in sight.

Back at the car its sole occupant — a pretty black-eyed *señorita* with hair coiffured high in Spanish style — was making hay while the sun shone and the cat was away. Two young punchers, total strangers, had bucked through the crowd to fetch her oranges and pop. A third was trying to talk to her in Spanish.

One glance from Gerda Keith abashed the lot. As they slunk back she turned upon the little coquet.

"You silly yearling! Throw out that chuck."

The young girl whitened but made no move to obey. Keith interposed with good-humored authority.

"I will attend to it — and to Pilar, Gerda. You're attracting attention."

His sister gave the crowd a disdainful glance and took the driver's seat. Welsh swung in beside her. Behind their backs the genially smiling Keith passed three of his cigars to the crestfallen boys. He jumped into the tonneau to uncap a bottle of pop and offer it to his ward.

"Here, *niña* — drown your sorrows in the flowing bowl."

The girl's black eyes flashed.

"I'm not a *niña* nor a ninny, either! And I won't drink a single drop. She — she's poisoned it!"

"Too bad, *ni* — Pilar *mia*. But I am dry and hot, and it is wet and cold, even though poisoned. Tell them I died happy."

The fizzing pop began to gurgle into his upturned mouth. Pilar snatched the opener from him, uncapped a bottle, and flung forward to reach it down over Welsh's thick shoulder. He was hotter and drier than Keith. The pop had begun to fizz behind his thin lips before he thought to offer first drink to Gerda. Her look of scorn sent the bottle out over the side of the car.

Back in the tonneau Pilar smiled sweetly and started to peel an orange.

"You see! Mat also finds it bad medicine. Even ginger ale is apt to upset the stomach. It's very bad for a girl's complexion, Don *Señor*. Besides, I like oranges better. See if one of them would choke Gerda."

"You little — kitten!" reproached Keith. "If only you'd keep your claws in and stop purring to the men; you know that Gerda means well."

"I've heard of the place that's paved with good intentions, Don *Señor*."

"Try to keep out of it," advised Keith. He took off his big hat. "This place is hot enough for anyone."

Pilar mockingly opened a fan and began to waft air over his bald head. He caught her plump little wrist and took the fan from her as if she were a naughty child. She drew back into the corner of the seat, her eyes hot with hurt and resentment, and her scarlet lips pouting.

CHAPTER II

ON THE MAKE

TYRREL had not forgotten his cigar. After one look at the giver's sister he could not have forgotten even if he had wished to. But he had no intention of claiming the gift before the favorable moment for which he had planned when he returned both cigar and case to the girl's brother.

Loss of first place in the bulldogging to the Keiths' pink-shirted friend caused him to lose himself in the crowd. Miss Keith had not looked like a girl who would waste much sympathy on a loser. Pity was the last thing one would expect from that proudly erect head and almost arrogant air.

Her well rounded figure had moved with lithe ease, but its suppleness had been that of a steel blade, not the soft pliancy of a vine. Nothing of the clinging tendril about her! She possessed all the strength and vitality and hardness of perfect health.

"With a tin hat and a shirt of can lids, she'd pass for one of those old-time Norse war-maidens — a Valkyrie," Tyrrel told himself.

A casual question about the Keiths, put to a wolfish faced puncher with a single red eye, let loose a flood of talk.

No, the Kay Kay was not one of the biggest outfits in the state, but it had the class. Though Don Keith looked like he belonged behind a ribbon counter, record was yet to be made of any cattle deal in which he had come out at the little end of the horn.

Mat Welsh was a cowman right. He could bust horses and men as well as Keith could gentle them. He patterned after his father, old One-Gun Welsh, who at his age had

taken a leading part in the Lincoln County war, yet had lived to die with his boots off. Most of his enemies had died with theirs on, in front of his single Colts. Small cause for surprise that the son of such a father should bust the bulldogging record. Odds were offered that he would also pull down first money in the riding and hog-tying contests.

As for the lady member of the Kay Kay, she needed no touting. Any cowboy could size up her fine points for himself. It was "handsome is as handsome does" too. She could ride, she could rope, she could shoot.

"Reg'lar what-they-used-to-call cattle queen," remarked Tyrrel.

His one-eyed informant slammed him on the shoulder.

"Buddy, you done said a mouthful! It'll take a honest-to-goodness cow king to get his rope and brand on that gal. She's a keen filly. I ain't betting on nobody, not even on Big Mat. She can queen like she can ride — and when it comes to riding! She's entered in the free-for-all tomorrow. Between her and Mat, buddy, the Kay Kay is a-going to skin you out of first place in all the big events."

"Well, I'll not sneeze at second money — if I'm lucky enough to win it," mildly replied Tyrrel. "Here's the sack race. Maybe I can make a first in it, anyhow."

The puncher's lip drew up in a wolfish sneer. What kind of a fourflusher was this? A big-event contestant willing to scuffle in the dust with a bunch of greasers for a picayune ten-dollar prize! But Tyrrel coolly ignored the sneer. He stepped into a gunnysack and started off with the excited boys and Mexicans. When he came back, the ten-dollar bill nestled in his pocket.

The sack race closed the day's program. Tyrrel slung his bed-roll on Ante and jogged up-creek, away from town, to his lone camp in the mesquite. Hotels cost money.

The morning program opened with boy and girl races.

For these Tyrrel was ineligible. Next came fancy rope work. In this contest only one man threatened to match the Coloradoan. He was a motion-picture cowboy who had never ridden the range a day in his life. Before breaking into the movies he had been a vaudeville juggler. In mere trickery, his twirling of the rope went beyond the utmost skill of Tyrrel.

But the second part of the contest eliminated the movie man. It called for real rope work. Tyrrel, without moving his feet, roped as commanded each and every leg of a horse that was ridden past him at a gallop. To round out the exhibition, he roped the horse by the tail and, with two twists of the wrists, haltered him with loops around the neck and bit.

Over in the Keith car Gerda smiled at the frowning Welsh.

"There goes your hog-tie money, Mat."

"To that slick Slim Jim? Not much!"

"His name's not Jim, Mat—it's Dick," corrected Pilar from the tonneau. She turned, ardent-eyed, to her guardian. "Wasn't that wonderful? He's a real *campeador*—and such a dear! Don't you think so, Gerda? Give me a fifty, Don *Señor*, to bet Mat he's going to be roped and ridden."

It was Keith's turn to frown.

"If you can't bet on your own outfit, at least don't back an outsider."

"What else can you expect of a—of her?" asked Gerda. "I tell you, she needs at least another year in the convent."

"Oh, no, no!" Pilar clutched Keith's arm in a panic. "If you make me go back, Don *Señor*, I'll run away. To be shut up again, away from those who ought to be kindest! It was almost as bad as the way Gerda rides me!"

Keith patted the clinging little hands.

"There, there, *niña*. I'll give you another month to show Gerda you can be sensible. There's our long roper lining up

for the bundle race. What do you say to his noble nightmare steed, Mat? Strikes me, Gerda will need her quirt in the free-for-all."

"That scarecrow!" scoffed Gerda. "Lobo can give him three lengths' start and win by six."

"I wouldn't bet on that yet awhile," cautioned Welsh. "He's a horse. Saw him stretch yesterday. This fool bundle run should give us a line on him."

Each contestant had been shown his bundle of woman's apparel in the row laid down before the grandstand. All jogged out to the far end of the course. At the pop of the starter's pistol they came galloping in a wild rush.

At the start several smaller horses "got the jump" on Ante. Tyrrel swung his spurs and yelled and beat the gray's shoulder with his hat. The "scarecrow" began to gain on the field. Half way down the course he forged ahead of the ruck. But four other racers came first to the line of bundles.

Tyrrel appeared to be a certain loser — until he pitched over Ante's big head and landed square before his bundle. The foremost men were handling their feminine garments with masculine awkwardness. Tyrrel ripped open his bundle as he caught it up, shook out the divided skirt by the band, and jumped into it. His long arms shot out of their elbows through the sleeves of the brilliant kimono.

The uprush of the field had set most of the riderless horses to shying and prancing. Ante stood with down-sagged head as if half asleep. But he had turned about. Tyrrel, with the skirt of his kimono flying like a banner, leap-frogged into his saddle over those sloping hindquarters. His quickness in dressing and mounting gave Ante a three-length start over the next quickest racer. He won the return heat by a neck.

"Just luck," said Welsh. "No dark horse there, Miss Gerda. It's fleabitten gray to the bone. He'd have lost if Slim Jim hadn't taken up the slack with his quick-change-

actor stunt."

"Such a showing, and not another horse in the bunch a real thoroughbred!" agreed the girl. "I could give them all four lengths, and win at a walk."

"No doubt of it — if you can hold Lobo down in such a mob," qualified her brother. Behind his shell-rim spectacles his gray eyes clouded. "Be sensible for once, Gerda. Let Mat ride for you."

She smiled at his alarm.

"What excuse shall I send to the judges? That I've broken my neck, or that I have a headache? They'd of course believe me. They're all too gentlemanly to guess I have a yellow streak."

"You may have all three — headache, broken neck and streak — if Lobo goes *loco*."

"Well, it's my funeral, Donnie — and my horse. If he rounds out your program, I bequeath you the pleasure of shooting him on my grave. I admire for to ride his ghost to the happy hunting grounds."

"*À la* Injin!" murmured Pilar.

The thorn failed to scratch even the surface of Gerda's composure.

"Not Indian, *niña*, but white man — real honest-to-goodness white, without a tinge of greaser. Don't you remember that old stray copy of tenth-century Icelandic tales — *Grettir the Strong* and *Burnt Njal* and the rest? Those viking boys could ride. They rode their war horses to Valhalla. I'll ride Lobo — or his ghost."

"Oh, Gerda — and you call yourself a Christian! *Ave Maria, salvar nos!*"

"Don't be silly. There comes the first steer. What d'you say, Mat? After that fancy rope work, it looks as if Colorado ought to be handy with a hogging string."

Welsh reddened.

"He's a fourflusher. Wait and see. I'll show him up."

To Keith and most of the other cowmen, the new contest held more interest than had the bulldogging. In rapid succession, steer after steer was sent plunging from the chute to be roped, thrown and hog-tied by the contestants. There were many expert ropers, all keen to win first honors and the unusually large money prize. Two men shaded the record, and one bettered it by a quarter-second.

At last came Welsh's turn. He used a heavy rope and threw his steer with a jerk that almost broke the beast's neck. As in the bulldogging, his attack was made with the ferocious swiftness of a grizzly. It clipped a full half second from the record.

"Cinched it," he announced when he plowed back to the car through the applauding crowd. "How about Colorow now? Two to one he misses pulling down even second money."

"A hundred on that," Gerda caught at the offer with aggravating promptness.

"May as well write me your check now, and save time later," countered Welsh.

Gerda smiled and gazed off aslant the crowd to where Tyrrel was unbuckling his rope from its saddle strap. The second of the two local men who had followed Welsh was bungling his job. A few moments, however, and his steer had been shunted out of the way.

As Tyrrel's steer plunged from the chute, Ante jumped. Here was real cow work. Unlike Welsh's victim, the steer did not crash down hard enough to be stunned. Though held from rising by Ante's steady pull on the taut rope, he threshed his legs about wildly. Yet somehow their kicks seemed intended only to meet the swift twists of Tyrrel's hogging string.

Up shot Tyrrel's hands. The steer's legs no longer waved. They were lashed together — hog-tied.

When the surprised judges had made sure of the tie, they announced the time of the Coloradoan — a full second under the record! As there were no more contestants, the half-second betterment of Welsh's time spelled victory.

The yelling and whooping brought no flush into Tyrrel's lean cheeks. He smiled his acknowledgment of the judges' congratulations and turned Ante in the direction of the Keith car.

The crowd had begun to break up for the noon recess. Hundreds of hero worshippers swarmed out to stare at the winner. Before he could weave his horse clear of the jam, the Keith car had rolled into the drive and was flowing away in the solid stream of cars and trucks.

"*Whoa*, Ante," he said. "That smoke is adjourned — but not *sine die*. What d'you say to a Scotch lunch? Hatful of oats and enough water to wet your whistle. You may have to shake a leg in the free-for-all. They say she has a horse that can stretch."

When, promptly at one, the Keith car rolled back to the spot assigned to it by favor of the rodeo marshal, the left fender grazed the lean thigh of Tyrrel. Without seeming to look, he noted the girl's ranch riding-dress — high-heeled boots, divided skirt, khaki blouse, old Stetson, six-inch cowboy belt of thick leather.

He lifted his own weathered Stetson as he looked past the girl to her brother.

"Howdy, Mr. Keith. If you don't mind, I'll trouble you now for that cigar of mine."

Keith held out the open case and glanced inquiringly at his sister. Custom and good manners made an introduction in order. The boy was not a roughneck. Yet if Gerda chose to take offense. . . . .

Her ungloved hand went out to the Coloradoan with gracious condescension. He found her grasp as firm as his

own and vibrant with energy. Her gray-green eyes favored him with a glow of interest.

"Glad to meet you, Tyrrel."

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Keith."

"Not all of it. Call it fifty-fifty. Your hogging string noosed me a two-hundred bet. Mr. Welsh thought he had first money cinched with that half second."

"Got to own up you can rope, Colorow," admitted Welsh. "I beat you, though, on the bulldogging. I'll repeat when it comes to the riding. How about a side bet? What's your limit? I'll give you ten to seven odds."

Tyrrel's face took on a look of sadness.

"Too good, Mr. Welsh. It'd be a shame to take the money."

"Think you're sure to win, do you?"

"Gambling is immoral and against the law. I'll leave it to Miss Keith if it isn't. Besides, he's a poor sport who bets on a sure thing."

"Dead sure you can ride, are you?"

Tyrrel cogitated over his answer.

"Well, I do rather count on being able to stick—leastways up to the time he makes his first jump."

Even Welsh could not hold back a grin.

"If you were a Kay Kay rider, we'd wish you luck," said Keith. "As it is, all we can say is, may the best man win."

"Thanks. I'll try to," replied Tyrrel without a trace of a smile.

"Oh, you'll win, Mr. Tyrrel—of course you will!" exclaimed Pilar. "You'll have to! You're going to carry my colors!"

She snatched a cluster of artificial flowers from the bosom of her filmy blouse and pressed it upon Tyrrel before either Keith or Gerda could interfere. Tyrrel could not dodge. To have rejected the lady's colors would have been rude. Nor

had he any wish to refuse. The tender challenge in the young girl's black eyes made acceptance easy, even in the presence of Gerda Keith.

Gerda gave the little coquet a look that goaded her brother out of his own annoyance. He rallied to the defense of his ward and sought to smooth over the awkward situation with a show of conventionality.

"Pilar, permit me to introduce Mr. Dick Tyrrel of Colorado. Tyrrel, my cousin Miss Chavez."

Tyrrel flourished his hat in a Spanish bow.

"I give you *buenos dias, señorita. Muchas gracias* for your colors. I see gold in them but no yellow. If I don't prove a good knight for my lady, it'll be good night for me. Won't some kind friend lend me a safety pin?"

"Come to me," invited Pilar. "You needn't look so savage, Gerda. He couldn't wear *your* colors, anyway. He'll be riding against you."

"If she drops hers, I might pick them up," suggested Tyrrel.

"You of course mean during the race," said Gerda.

Her tone was haughty. The caressing touches with which Pilar was securing her colors to the breast of Tyrrel's shirt with her gold clasp pin would have exasperated a saint. The silly baby vamp!

"That was my thought, Miss Keith," agreed Tyrrel. "Ante horse sometimes gets off on the wrong hoof. When shall I hand your favors back to you — mid-heat, or when you follow me over the line?"

"That's enough from you!" broke in Welsh. "You'll find it ain't healthy trying to be funny with a Kay Kay lady. *Vamos!*"

Tyrrel gave Gerda a look of bland innocence.

"That means, 'get out,' doesn't it? May I assist you to get out too? They're clearing the course for the free-for-all.

I'll let you bust a way for me through the herd, if you're so set on leading."

Gerda did not lack a sense of humor. She swung out beside the lean young Coloradoan.

"No, Mat. Don't bother. Tyrrel will see me mounted all right."

Welsh's strong face purpled. From behind him Pilar all but threw a kiss to the bearer of her colors. Keith missed the enticing by-play of his seat-mate.

"Wait, Gerda," he urged. "It's not yet too late. That crazy devil — let Mat ride him."

"Are you so anxious to get rid of poor Mat?" mocked the girl. "You know very well, Donnie, when I'm no longer able to ride my own mount, you'll find me on a stretcher."

CHAPTER III

BY A HEAD AND NECK

ON THEIR way to the horse corral the girl gave Tyrrel a glance of genuine friendliness.

"Not looking for a first in this, are you?"

"I could use the money."

"Well, if you have any side money up on it, better hedge. My Lobo comes of pedigreed racers."

"Much obliged — and I'll swap tips. You may turn your wolf loose, but he may not head the pack. Ante has a streak in him. It's not yellow — it's greased lightning. Too bad! I sure hate to see a lady lose."

Gerda's eyes flashed with emerald fire.

"I'm not a woman in this — I'm a contestant. If you pull your horse in my favor, I'll quirt you into taking the dirty money."

"Don't worry. I'll pull down that first money without any favor from you or anyone else," countered Tyrrel.

They came to the horse corral. A lame little gray-haired Kay Kay wrangler had saddled Gerda's thoroughbred. But the big high-strung roan was half frenzied from sight and sound and smell of whirring motors and yelling mobs. When, with an expert hop mount, Gerda flung herself up into the saddle, he reared so high that he almost toppled over backwards. On coming down, he whirled and cannoned into the side of the corral.

Most women would have shrieked. Gerda pulled his head down with a steady powerful grip on the Spanish curb bit that soon had him under control. He stood quivering, ears back, eyes wild.

"Lobo — he looks it," said Tyrrel, who had caught up a short wrangler's rope for emergency use, in case the thoroughbred got out of hand.

Gerda smiled so disdainfully over his alarm for her that he hastened off to saddle Ante.

The free-for-all course was a half-mile straightaway, from the outer end of the rodeo grounds to the gap between the far corner of the grandstand and the barbecue pits. The tests of preliminary races had caused all but nine of the entries to drop out.

The feminine partner of the Kay Kay was the only lady contestant. As such, she was offered choice of position in the starting-line. She took the middle, where her roan would be farthest from the incrowding spectators along each border of the course. Lobo had come up from the corral dancing sideways, crab-style, ahead of the sleepy-eyed Ante.

Tyrrel found himself placed near the right end of the line. He waited as tranquilly as his horse. At the crack of the pistol the other men dug in their spurs for a jumping start. Tyrrel allowed Ante to get into his stride as he pleased. A half mile run does not call for the leap-off of a short dash.

For the moment Tyrrel's interest centered upon Gerda Keith. At the shot he saw the roan go up into the air. Before Gerda could pull down the rearing beast, all the other horses were leaping away in full stride. Lobo caught the bit in his teeth and bolted after the field.

Ante had started off among the tail-enders. He did not stay with them. From a distance he appeared to float through the ruck like a gray shadow. Half way down the course he came up to within three lengths of the sprinting leaders. The pair, both of them quarter-horses, were already beginning to blow. Ante's nostrils had hardly opened. He ran with an easy slouching gait as deceptive as the slinking lope of a coyote. Nothing about him suggested strain or

unusual speed. The heavy look of his forebody and the smooth play of his wolfhound hindquarters deceived the eye.

So far Tyrrel had been called upon to do nothing more than sit his saddle. He began to consider the advisability of pulling Ante in a little. To win by a wide margin is not good racing strategy. Only thing, that Keith thoroughbred might yet prove dangerous. What could have become of him?

Yells of fear from the spectators on the right answered the question. The big roan was dashing furiously along the edge of the crowd at runaway speed. Hard as Gerda tugged to veer him clear, the backward surge of the terrified spectators alone saved the foremost from being trampled.

"Ante horse," said Tyrrel, " this begins to look like a race. Better step on the gas."

A touch of the spur served as accelerator. Ante began to run in earnest. The thoroughbred had already come up opposite him—was forging ahead. Ante lunged into his full stride. He swept past the slowing leaders. Instead of losing more ground to the roan, he began to regain what he had lost.

Another quarter of the course flew back under the swift-thudding hoofs of the roan and the gray. Only a few seconds now to the goal line. Ante was still gaining. He came up with the runaway roan neck and neck—he crept into the lead by a head, by a neck, by half a length.

Tyrrel shot a glance across at his rival. Gerda did not return the look. She had need of her utmost skill and strength and courage to out-fight her crazed horse's obsession to swerve into the crowd. All down the remainder of the course the people were heaving back. But the farther the front of the crowd receded, the farther the runaway edged over to that side.

The space in front of the grandstand had been kept clear

of spectators. Its six-foot plank wall stood slightly oblique to the race course. At the very moment that Tyrrel felt certain of victory he saw the danger. Unless forced out, the maddened thoroughbred would angle against that solid plank front of the grandstand. Going as he was at top speed, the glancing crash would mean disaster. The best that his rider could hope for would be a crushed leg.

A touch of the rein swerved Ante to the right. The cross-slant lost ground for him. He made the edge of the course half a length behind the roan. Close ahead rose the in-angling barrier of the grandstand front.

Spurred to his utmost effort, Ante seemed to flatten down. With a tremendous burst of speed, he shot forward between the back-struggling crowd and the runaway. He grazed so close alongside the roan that Tyrrel had to jerk up his left leg to clear Gerda's knee and stirrup.

The side of Ante's chuckle head was almost scraping the grandstand when his heavy forebody swung out against the shoulder of the roan. The shock staggered the runaway. He reeled to the left. Ante grazed the planks and veered clear, to again crowd over against the roan. He shouldered him all during the wild plunging finish along the front of the stand.

A few yards across the goal line Gerda brought the runaway to a stop with a tug on the bit that almost broke his jaw. Heedless of the other inrushing racers, she flashed a furious look from Tyrrel to the judges.

"I protest the race!" she cried. "This man interfered."

One of the judges, a cadaverous bowlegged old cowman, walked out towards her through the dust of the last racer.

"'Scuse me, ma'am," he said. "Just a minute while some'un calls a doctor for the boy."

"Doctor?" questioned the angry girl.

"No, I'm all right," declared Tyrrel. "No bones broken.

It just barked the skin. Wouldn't have done even that if I'd had on my chaps."

Gerda wheeled her horse around to the right side of the winner. All the way down, from knee to boot top, his leg showed crimson through the rent in his blue overalls.

"You see," he said. "Just scraped it a bit against the planks. About your protest—it's well taken. I own up to the interfering."

The girl's eyes blazed with exasperation.

"Don't lie! That protest is recalled. You ought to know I made it while still too furious to realize what you had done. Is that enough, or do you demand a written apology? You won by a neck, and saved mine—also Lobo's."

"If you say I win, that's enough, Miss Keith. It spells first money. Golden salve soothes the sordid soul."

"You'll come with me. There's a first-aid kit in the car."

"Thanks. I'll take you up on that. Need my leg this afternoon for the riding."

The Keiths' car came plowing through the midday upbreak of the crowd. Shouldered by Ante, the thoroughbred pranced to meet the car without again trying to bolt.

At sight of Tyrrel's leg Pilar's black eyes widened. She swayed over with her dainty head against Keith's immaculate shirt front. Tyrrel smiled reassurance at her as he drew off and drained his boot.

"Nothing to get scared over, Miss Chavez. It's like beauty—merely skin deep. You see, I'm still carrying your colors."

"Would you mind taking both horses to the corral, Mat?" requested Keith. "Tyrrel will lunch with us."

Welsh went off with the horses, none too willingly, while Pilar cut and lighted a cigar for Tyrrel. Gerda already had the first-aid kit open. With cool efficiency, she treated and bandaged Tyrrel's leg. Though he did not wince, he

puffed rather quickly at his cigar. There was little of womanly tenderness either in Gerda's look or in the touch of her strong white fingers. She must have known that so large a skin scraping was far more painful than a deep wound of smaller surface. But she spoke no word of sympathy.

At the other extreme, Pilar watched the hasty operation with hands clasped and scarlet lips murmuring coos of compassion for her brave *campeador*. Both Keith and Gerda betrayed annoyance over the young girl's indiscreet sweetness to the stranger. She ended with a soft-spoken invitation.

"You must motor in beside me, Mr. Tyrrel. I can sew. I'll mend that tear as soon as we reach the hotel."

His grin of amused assent brought Gerda's straight eyebrows together. She spoke with the first trace of concern that she had shown for him.

"How thoughtless of you, Pilar, asking him to hobble all round the car to you! He rides where he is."

On Welsh's return, the loss of his seat to Tyrrel pleased him as little as it had the pouting Pilar. Gerda ignored both of them. Driving into town she plied her seat-mate with shrewd questions about cattle conditions in Colorado.

"Dry range?" she replied to one of his statements. "Your driest must be a bog compared with some down here. Why, right over across the mesa from the Kay Kay is one stretch of thirty miles without a cow on it."

"Sands, eh? Well, we have our own sand hills, Miss Keith — west side the Sangre de Christo. Regular Sahara desert."

"So have we — south of us. But the range I'm talking about is best kind of feed — grama grass to your knee."

"Sheep country?"

"Not even sheep. It's dry — no creek or spring or tank in more than thirty miles."

"How about stocking it with a flock of camels?" suggested Tyrrel. "Keep 'em six days out at work grass-cutting, and on the seventh day let 'em tank up."

Gerda shot a searching glance at his sad face and twinkling ruddy brown eyes.

"Hope you're not that kind of camel yourself. The Kay Kay can use one or two more top riders. Shall I speak to Mr. Welsh?"

Tyrrel's eyes twinkled still brighter.

"I'll think it over, ma'am."

The car leaped under the jab of Gerda's foot on the accelerator. She was not accustomed to men stopping to think over her rarely offered favors. She swerved into the ditch to whiz past a truckload of rainbow-clad Mexican girls. Tyrrel's mouth rounded.

"*Whew!* Acts like it's tanked up on wood alcohol. Makes me nervous. Tell it *whoa*, please."

The car slowed down to moderate speed. How could anyone stay angry with so good-humored a boy?

In the traffic jam near the hotel Tyrrel jumped from the car and disappeared into a clothing store. A quarter-hour later he limped across the hotel lobby clad in new overalls, new shirt and carefully polished boots, and smelling of barber's soap.

Keith met him at the door of the grillroom. They went in to the table where Welsh and the girls were already ordering lunch.

Even Gerda could find no fault with the guest's conduct at table. He did not make noises over his soup or eat with his knife, choke his fork, or drink from his fingerbowl. In fact, his manners were almost as polished as her brother's and decidedly more so than Welsh's. Better still, his talk was easy and quiet. He did not push himself.

Yet after all that, to think of his pulling out Pilar's

silly bouquet of artificial flowers and allowing her to pin it on his new shirt!

When the party made ready for the drive back to the rodeo grounds, Tyrrel found himself assigned to the seat beside the little lady of his colors. He responded to her coquetry with good-humored amusement until he met the displeased look of Keith. After that he sobered and fixed a thoughtful gaze upon the back of Gerda's severely erect head.

Owing to the prominence that they had won, both he and Welsh had been listed last in the final and most important event of the rodeo — the riding of outlaws. Tyrrel excused himself from the car on the plea that he must make sure of the New Mexican contest rules. In spite of all her artless vamping, the little *señorita* was a nice girl. Best for her that he should leave before her attentions to him too greatly angered her cousins.

The horse corral was now very much alive with the contest buckers — every savage brute among them an outlaw of established name and fame. Several had never been ridden to a finish. Tyrrel perched on the top rail and watched the bunch mill about, squealing and biting and kicking. The cadaverous old cowman who had served as judge in the free-for-all came to slouch against the corral beside him.

"Howdy, son," he drawled. "Picking out one to wear the silver saddle, *huh?*"

"Sure, dad. Want an option on that saddle? Leather suits me better. I'd rather have the cash than the dash."

The cowman's shaggy brows drew down over his shrewd eyes.

"I'm Howbert — Lazy S Bar — up near the Hakreeyaw Mountains."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Howbert."

"Oughta be. Chance to rope a couple thousand."

Tyrrel's ruddy eyes warmed.

"I agree to that in principle. When do we call a plenary session?"

"*Huh?* Looky here, son, no joking. I mean biz. Seen you with the Kay Kay."

"Don't shoot! It's not my outfit yet."

"Tell you, I mean biz. I want a deal on a thousand head white-faces — prime young feeders. Got to meet some notes *pronto*. The Kay Kay can dig up the cash. Get me a half-cent under market, and you get two dollars a head."

"I'll think it over."

"'Twon't keep."

"What's your hotel? You'll hear from me before breakfast, or not at all. Hold on. Why don't you deal direct with the Kay Kay?"

"Reckon you ain't been located hereabout long, son. Time of the Lincoln County war, happens the outfit I was riding for lined up on t'other side from old One-Gun Welsh. Savvy?"

"Well, I get a glimmer of the situation. You want me to serve as dove of peace at two bucks a coo."

"Dammit, no! I'm not dealing with Mat Welsh or any of his outfit. I've give you a option on them thousand white-faces. They're your cattle. You sell 'em to the Kay Kay and take up your option. Fork over two bits to make this here deal a legal bargain."

Tyrrel grinned as he handed down the demanded twenty-five-cent piece.

"First time I ever was panhandled just this way."

"You sassy son-of-a-gun! Don't disremember you got to out-ride Big Mat. You done Miss Keith a good turn with that nervy crowding of her locoed hoss. That swung Don Keith your way. He's white. But you got to beat Mat, else he won't deal. He'll ride you."

"Lot of luck in a bucking contest, Mr. Howbert — all

kinds."

"That's no lie. And they ain't no good luck in this here bunch of bad actors. It's a case of all worse. But the worstest are Shimmy, Perfect Lady and Still Hell. Shimmy jumps sideways two ways at once. Perfect Lady, she flip-flops and bites a hunk out of you. If you draw Still Hell, you got just one single chance. Don't wake him up. Sit still your ownself and hold your breath till the judges draw you another hoss. I want you should postpone your fun'ral long enough to make that deal. Promise."

"I'll think about it. Here come the fireworks."

CHAPTER IV

STILL HELL

ONE of the outlaws had been roped and dragged from the corral. Hard as he fought, expert hands soon had him saddled and bridled. The first contestant swung into the saddle.

The horse began to buck rather mildly for an outlaw. The rider sat with his hands well raised, legs tightly clamped against the sides of his horse, and feet straight down in the stirrups.

"Thought he was supposed to be a rider," said Tyrrel. "What's he waiting for? He's disqualified already. Not one single solitary scratch in five jumps."

"*Heh?*" queried Howbert. "What makes you think he's got to scratch him?"

"Regular rules — three scratches in the first five jumps. Contest rules."

"Not down here, son. All you're called on for is stick and not pull leather. It's up to your hoss to buck. If he won't, the judges draw you another. That's how mebbe you'll live to brag you got on Still Hell and got off again — without his help."

Tyrrel looked down at his spurs.

On the whole, the contest proved rather more exciting than any of recent years. A few of the outlaws failed to buck; a few others bolted. The greater number fought hard. Of these less than half were ridden to a finish.

Perfect Lady broke a leg in flip-flopping and had to be shot. Still Hell failed to erupt. Two riders drew him. Each in turn mounted with utmost gentleness and sat very quiet

until the rules permitted them to leap clear of that smouldering volcano.

Little Shimmy spilled two riders with greater ease than any other horse.

"Told you so," said Howbert. "Buckaroo who rides that devil has got the silver saddle good as cinched. Nobody dast tackle Still Hell no more. He's got a record of two busters killed and four more what've never rode again."

Tyrrel's face lengthened.

"It'll be just my luck to draw him."

"If so be, son, you seen how them wise boys done. You know what to do."

"Yes," agreed Tyrrel. "I know what I'll do."

Of the remaining contestants, a few rode their horses to a finish. The others landed in the dust. So far, three men had made a very good showing. To shade them would require the riding of an exceptionally hard bucker.

The excitement of the great crowd of spectators screwed up to the highest pitch when Welsh's name was called. What would the son of old One-Gun do to honor his dad? He spoke to the judges. They remonstrated. He stood pat. They agreed.

The announcer caught a deep breath and blared through his megaphone:

"Mr. Welsh of the Kay Kay has asked the privilege of trying to ride Shimmy."

Wild yells of approval greeted the announcement. Big Mat had proved he did not lack grit. He was the son of his dad, and no mistake. He might get spilled, but he sure was no fourflusher.

He shot a hard look at Tyrrel, still perched on the corral rail, and tautened the cinch of his saddle on Shimmy with a heave that sank the broad hair band into the flesh.

"By —" swore Howbert. "'Nother yank, and he'll

cave in the little nag's ribs. Makes the bronc look like he's got on old-style corsets. That's a Welsh's idee of fair play. Nemmind. Shimmy mebbe'll spill him yet."

Welsh flung himself upon the outlaw like a leaping grizzly. His thick legs clamped fast under the knee-brace bulges of the broncho-buster saddle. The first would-be rider of Shimmy had spilled before his right foot found its stirrup. The second had been pitched off by the third twisting side-jump. But Welsh's thighs and knees crushed against the sides of the small horse with the power of a steel vise.

Shimmy seemed fairly to flash, so swift did he make his twisting sideward leaps. Yet every jump found Welsh still fast in the saddle. He did not even bend. His thick body remained almost rigid. It was as if he and his saddle and the whirling outlaw had grown fast together.

Squealing with rage, Shimmy went into a frenzy. He spun like a top. Welsh still sat him, firm as a rock; and, like a rock, at every jump he jolted the horse with all his weight. The cruel tightness of the cinch was crushing the little outlaw's fiery heart.

He quit with a suddenness that hushed the mob to gasps of surprise.

"Busted!" growled Howbert. "Busted, by ginger!"

"Like an A-1 quarter-horse," said Tyrrel. "Good for a sprint, but couldn't keep going for distance. Mr. Welsh sized him up. Have to hand it to him, just the same. He can ride. Well, they're waiting to find out what to say about me next. Let's hope they don't say it with flowers."

Pensive-eyed, Tyrrel sauntered towards the judges. Welsh stood beside the conquered Shimmy, breathing deeply, his face a dark brick red. Otherwise he showed no effects from the jerks and jolts of Shimmy's whirlwind bucking.

"Best yet, Mr. Welsh," Tyrrel congratulated him. "You sure can fork a horse."

Welsh frowned at the subdued animal.

"I rode him. Only trouble, he didn't last enough. Tex Leary's horse kept going a good two minutes longer — next good bucker to Shimmy, at that."

"Next good, Mr. Welsh, but not a close second. Shimmy's fireworks are in a class by themselves — short but sweet."

"Well, you'll have to do some riding to cut Tex out of second money."

Tyrrel's look saddened.

"I'm not expecting second money."

The big man looked his contempt.

"Quitter, are you?"

"Not exactly. It's only that I'm not after second money."

Without waiting for another gibe, Tyrrel turned to the judges.

"Gentlemen, I have been talking with that old-timer yonder. He told what would give me something to brag about. If you don't mind, before you draw a horse for me, I'd like to try sliding onto Still Hell."

"*Whoa,* buddy," advised the youngest judge. "Old How must have it in for you. Still Hell is set on a hair trigger. Third time may prove the charm. Better back up."

Everybody around laughed.

"Colorow wants to look down the muzzle and see if it's loaded," jeered Welsh. "Doesn't guess it'll go off — and him too."

"That's the gamble — will it?" mildly questioned Tyrrel. "Think of the fun of twiggling the trigger, and wondering what will happen if she does rip loose!"

"If that's your bet, cowboy, we'll deal you the card you call for," the young judge spoke for his fellows.

Up went the megaphone of the announcer.

"Attention, ladees and gents — and buckaroos! Tyrrel of Colorado wants to gamble he can gambol on Still Hell."

The punning announcement was greeted with mingled cheers and jeers and laughter. Tyrrel quietly submitted his bronco-buster saddle for inspection. The spread of the knee-bulges measured a full half inch under the limit set by the contest rules. He shook his head when the judges offered him a full-width saddle.

"No, thanks, gentlemen. Too much spread makes it hard to jerk your legs down, if they happen to get tossed up in front."

"Don't worry. Case that happens, you'll come down ahead of them," said Welsh.

"I'll think about it," replied Tyrrel almost tearfully. "Good thing I lack your weight. I usually fall light."

As he went over to watch his saddle put on Still Hell, the old cowman Howbert waddled around in front of Welsh. He drew a tight wad of bank notes from a pocket of his leather vest.

"Say, young man, here's a roll I picked up last night on a poker table. It says the boy is going to ride his hoss."

"Ride Still Hell!" The derision in Welsh's blue eyes hardened into a stare of perplexed scrutiny. "Where've I seen you before?"

"Mebbe you've got me mixed with some'un else, sonny. Nemmind. You don't have to be acquainted to put up a bet. Draw a check to yourself and endorse it. I won't have no trouble cashing the paper. Charlie here'll hold the stakes. Loan him your checkbook, Charlie."

"Needless trouble to write a check," said Welsh. "It would be coming back to me anyway."

"'Scuse me, mister. I didn't know you was a fourflusher," apologized Howbert.

Welsh's hand dropped to his hip and jerked away from the empty pistol holster. Howbert's half toothless mouth twisted in a sardonic smile.

"Disremembered you'd unpacked your gun for your riding, *heh?* I could 'a' plugged you for making that move. Self-defense. Any *gentleman* here got nerve to cover my four-sixty-five? It says the boy rides Still Hell."

A chorus of eager voices met the offer. But Welsh blared down all others.

"Hold on. That's my bet — and I'll raise it a thousand."

"Sorry," grunted the old cowman, "dam' sorry! Four-sixty-five's the size of my roll. Cover it, or back up."

As Welsh scribbled his name on the check, Tyrrel made ready to swing up on the motionless Still Hell. The jeering spectators looked to see him slide into the saddle, in gingerly imitation of his two predecessors.

He mounted like a flash. The next instant his spurs raked the sides of Still Hell from flank to neck. With a squeal of astonished fury, the outlaw exploded into action. His first jump equalled Shimmy's worst.

Before the dumbfounded crowd could catch its breath to yell its amazement, Still Hell had made five jumps, and three times out of the five, Tyrrel's spurs had jabbed him either in flanks or shoulders. After that Tyrrel did no more scratching or jabbing. He had complied with the Northern contest rules. All that remained to do was to see if he could stick out the terrific bucking.

Still Hell was every one of the most vicious among the outlaws, packed inside a single skin. He was an equine maniac, a fiend in horseflesh. He did not buck in any one style or succession of styles. His method was a jumbled tornado of pitching, stiff-legged jumping, rearing, side-jumping, swirling, sun-fishing. He had all the quickness of a cat, the strength of a bear, the fury of a tiger.

His mad efforts to hurl his rider out of the saddle — the wild jolts and gyrations and pitches — whipped Tyrrel's long body about from front to rear, from side to side, like a storm-

lashed willow. His head jerked on his hunched shoulders as if about to snap off. In both neck and body, he lacked the iron rigidity of Welsh's thickset frame. Nor did he possess the advantage of Welsh's weight.

Yet more — Shimmy was a small horse; Still Hell was larger and stronger, more versatile, and no less quick. The wonder was that he failed to fling his rider within the first half minute. Only in their supreme moments had the worst of the other horses equalled his frightfulness.

But somehow Tyrrel continued to stick on. Time after time, in rapid succession, he hurled over as if to a certain fall, only to whip back again the other way.

In the Keiths' car, Pilar had cowered down to hide her white face against her guardian's shoulder. The bald round of Keith's uncovered head glistened with beads of sweat.

Gerda had swung out and up on the hood. Her gray-green eyes were aflame with delight. Her full-lunged cry carried bell-like above the wild yelling of the mob ——

"Ride him! Ride him, cowboy! *R-r-ride him!*"

Old Howbert alone of all the thousands of onlookers, did not cry out or yell.

"Lord!" he grunted. "Boy like that — busted neck or a rupture — dirty shame!"

"Busted nothing!" shouted Welsh. "You going blind? He's riding him — dammit — he's riding him!"

It was the truth; and it was the rider of Shimmy who had been first to perceive the truth. Tyrrel was out-guessing Still Hell. Every whip-over of his body was to meet and balance against a like cat twist or jump of the furious outlaw. Above the waist he might have been made of whalebone; below he was like cast steel. And whatever the violent whirl or plunge of the squealing demon beneath him, his hands held the reins high, clear of neck and saddle. He never once "pulled leather."

To the relief of the old cowman, Still Hell at last began to slow down. This did not altogether surprise Howbert. He had never before known a horse to keep up such terrific bucking for so long a time. If only the boy could stick on a little longer!

After all, Still Hell was made only of flesh and bone. Even such devilishness as his — such maniacal fury — could no longer sustain him at the full pitch of frantic action. The wonder was that he had been able to hold so long to such frenzied violence.

And Tyrrel continued to stick on. With the same spring-like alertness, he met the last desperate flurries of the tiring outlaw. But he took care not to scratch him into another eruption.

The slowing of the action permitted nearby spectators a view of the rider's face, between the jerks and whirls. It was gray-white. His eyes seemed to have sunk back into their sockets. He began to wobble a little in the saddle. But Still Hell had almost run down. Tyrrel's slackening jaw tightened in a last rally of stubborn grit.

Still Hell did not quit, as had Shimmy. When at last he came to a stop, it was only to recover breath and strength for another furious outburst. Tyrrel crouched warily on the suddenly lax demon. He waited. Still Hell stood sagged in a quivering, leg-spread, head-drooped slump, wheezing for breath.

CHAPTER V

BITES AND BARGAINS

ONE of the judges raised his hand in a beckoning gesture. Tyrrel made no attempt to hide his relief. He rolled out of his saddle, staggered clear of the vicious outlaw, swayed and tottered. Before he could fall, old Howbert had a corded arm about his shoulders and a pint flask under his nose.

"*Hi!* you young son of a b—" he yipped his sardonic glee. "Have a swig of snake med'cine."

Tyrrel wiped the bloody foam off his gray lips and took a single swallow from the flask. His sunken eyes brightened. He smiled and straightened up.

Gerda Keith was sprinting across the hoof-torn sod. She swung the car's water-bag up before him, her eyes glistening like dew-wet emeralds.

"Don't tell me you're hurt, Dick!" she accused.

He drank deep and drew back to clutch his in-shrunken chest.

"I'm 'fraid — he's — busted something, Miss Keith. Look . . . . here!"

Out came one of her brother's choice cigars, badly crushed.

Gerda joined in the loud "*Haw! haw!*" of the old cowman. Their mirth goaded Welsh beyond endurance. He swung forward, red as a beet, and flung out his clenched fist at the judges.

"This horse is not ridden to a finish," he charged. "He's not busted."

"Back up," advised Howbert, none too gently. "He's been rode to a stand. That's all's called for. You seen the

judge sign the boy to dismount."

"He was ready to quit — all in. Look at him now! I'll give him fifty dollars to get on again — a hundred if he lasts three jumps!"

"Not for a thousand!" said Tyrrel. "I'm willing to try anything *once*. How about yourself?"

"That's talking!" put in Howbert. "I bet you my roll and your check, you can't give Still Hell two hours' rest, and ride him your ownself."

The dare was a bitter dose to swallow. But Welsh had seen what the outlaw could do. He hesitated.

"Own up, Mat," said Gerda. "Be a sport. You know Tyrrel has won the saddle, fair and square."

Again Welsh hesitated. The girl's eyes widened with surprise. Her head went up. Welsh held out a grudging hand to the victor.

"It's your saddle, Tyrrel. I wouldn't get on that devil for *any* money."

"Give him a shoulder to the car," ordered Gerda. "He's dining with us."

Howbert stepped clear. Tyrrel gave him a nod, and accepted Welsh's reluctant aid because Gerda gave him her own shoulder on the other side. When he started to walk, his over-strained thigh muscles could not control his legs. He wobbled like a new-born calf.

By now he was in the thick of a surging mob of admirers. They fell back slowly before Welsh's frown, but opened free passage in response to Gerda's orders.

As they came to the car, Pilar eagerly moved over to make room at her side for Tyrrel.

"*Poder de Dios!*" she exulted. "You won, *mio campeador!* You bring back my colors, covered with glory!"

"And dust," added Gerda. "What he needs most is a boiling hot bath."

With a quick straining of her supple strength, she boosted Tyrrel up into the front seat. She was at the wheel before the chagrined Welsh could crowd his bulk into the space made clear by Pilar. Behind their shell-rimmed spectacles Keith's gray eyes first twinkled with amusement, then clouded.

The ride into town gave Tyrrel time to make sure he had not been internally injured. It also gave him back strength enough to walk into the hotel unaided.

Even had he not been accompanied by Welsh and the Keiths, everything about the hotel would have been his for the asking. He was top rider, crack roper and head broncho buster of the rodeo — winner of three out of four of the main events.

He dodged several urgently offered flasks, bucked through a squad of reporters, and plunged into a hot bath. He was willing to follow the advice of Gerda Keith. She might not be one of the angelic tender-eyed kind, like her little *señorita* cousin; but she had a deal of commonsense . . . . and sand. . . . .

As for looks, she could give any girl he had ever known, hearts and spades, and take every trick. Only trouble, that hardness. A girl had a right to hard muscles, same as a man. It proved her perfect fitness for outdoor life. But that look was different. It meant a spirit just as hard as her muscles. . . . .

Yet there beside Still Hell, when she came running with the water — had he been too sick and giddy to see clearly — or had he not caught the glisten of tears in those wonderful gray-green eyes?

Lax from the hot soak but eased of all aches, he attempted to take a *siesta* in the choice room proudly offered for his use by a trio of eastern tourists. The squad of reporters forced their way in and bombarded him with queries about his past life and achievements. When he reached his limit

on dodging his face saddened.

"It's no use, boys. I'll have to make a clean breast of it, even if it costs me all the plaudits of the admiring multitude. I own up. I've run away from a wife and thirteen small children. Had to take to contest riding just to get a little rest and quiet."

The reporters withdrew, routed but laughing.

Ravenous hunger drove him out of his retirement, on the stroke of the hour for the opening of the dining-room. In the lobby a crowd was swarming around his silver-mounted prize saddle. At sight of him they shouted and charged. Some of the men had been celebrating with bootleg. He was in real danger of being ridden on their shoulders. Gerda led Welsh to his rescue.

Safe in the dining-room, at the Kay Kay table, he recovered breath enough for speech.

"Talk — about fame! Bellboy brought me — pitcher ice-water — 'thout my ringing. Said, 'Nossur, 'nuff honor serving you. Du'want no tip a-tall, sir.'"

"Impossible!" cried Gerda. "Why, that's the very *tip*-top of fame!"

Pilar was eying him with a reproachful look.

"Is it — it is true, Mr. Tyrrel, what those newspaper men were laughing over? They said you deserted your wife and — and ——"

"Well, no, Miss Chavez — not exactly. That was rather an exaggeration. There are not thirteen. You see, my first wife ——"

"Oh, then you *are* married?"

"*Uh* — well, not exactly." Tyrrel's side glance caught the sharp change in Gerda's look. "Fact is, I haven't yet roped her — my first wife, I mean. But I've made up my mind. I'm going to be married — some day."

Gerda joined in Pilar's quick laugh. But neither her

brother nor Welsh seemed to find the reply amusing. They started to discuss range conditions, the packers, and the market for beef on the hoof. Tyrrel listened to their talk with one alert ear. The other took in the pretty chatter of Pilar and Gerda's occasional cool interruptions.

By the time coffee was served he was as full of information as of food.

"Excuse the change of subject, Miss Keith," he remarked. "I hear Mr. Welsh speaking of feeders. Happens I have an option on a bunch."

Welsh thought he saw a chance to score.

"Mighty good of you, Tyrrel, to favor us — only we're not picking up little bunches of scrubs. Too many small-bore rustlers round here dealing in half-carload lots."

"Hope you don't class me with them," protested Tyrrel. "I never stop at half-carloads — when I can get away with a herd. What d'you say to a thousand prime young white-faces?"

"Poor joke, that."

"Think so? Make an offer, and call me for a show-down."

Gerda had become all keen attention.

"He's not bluffing, Mat."

"What if he isn't?" interposed her brother. "There can be no question of any offer by us. You know we are not in shape to buy."

"Not with seventy thousand lying idle?"

"Idle? You mean, safe in savings bank."

The girl smiled her scorn.

"Four per cent and safe! When we can gamble on the chance of big prices in next season's market!"

"I'm offering a bargain, Mr. Keith," said Tyrrel. "Would a quarter cent under the present market interest you?"

"We never pay within a cent of market for rustled stock," thrust Welsh.

Tyrrel smiled and waited for the answer of Keith. It came in a tone of good-natured finality.

"The Kay Kay range is stocked. If we take on a thousand feeders, we'll run short of grass."

"Not if the rains come a little early," differed Gerda. "Safety first — that's always your whine, Donnie! And dad ranged his first herd in Apache country! Come on. Take a chance."

Her brother's smile did not change. She might as well have struck a rubber post. Tyrrel turned his seemingly indifferent glance from the brother and sister to the broad, full face of Welsh. Which of the three dominated the partnership?

Would Big Mat side with the girl to win her favor, or would his desire to shut the offerer out of a deal cause him to back her brother? Would it be better to stand pat on the quarter-cent discount, or to bid down a point or two?

Old Howbert had said he would take a full half cent under the market. But he had proved himself white. No doubt he could use that other quarter cent. Why not make a bluff?

"It's a real bargain, Mr. Keith. You know it is. Market's low, anyway. Quarter cent under is a big bargain."

"True enough," agreed the genial baldheaded senior partner of the Kay Kay, who had never been known to come out second best in a cattle deal. "True enough, Mr. Tyrrel. From a money standpoint it is an indisputable bargain. But our range is already overstocked."

"Yes, and how about delivery?" demanded Welsh. "Rail rates eat profits. Where've you got your mavericks hid? Way up in Colorado?"

"Just at present they're up my sleeve, Mr. Welsh. May I ask you kindly to excuse my keeping them there, if the Kay Kay does not care to talk business?"

"But we do, Dick!" cried Gerda, her cheeks aglow with

rich color. "That is, I do, and if Mat won't back me against Donnie, I'll sell out and go it alone."

"Gerda!" remonstrated her brother.

She ignored him to look Tyrrel up and down with a business-like scrutiny.

"Want a tryout as foreman?"

"I'll think it over. How about the pay?"

"Strikes me, that's all you do think about," said Welsh. "Always got your eye out for the money — one of these on-the-make sharps."

"I admit you're not one of them, Mr. Welsh. You're voting with Mr. Keith to turn down my quarter-cent-under offer. I don't mind being classed with Miss Keith."

The irony bit deep.

"Who says how I'm voting? It's a good enough gamble. What do you stand to get out of the deal?"

"How much do you suppose, at such a discount?"

"That's enough," said Gerda. "If the steers are as represented, and F. O. B. within reasonable trailing distance of Socorro, I'll take them."

"They're up towards the Jacarilla Mountains — and they're your steers, Miss Keith, subject to your approval on inspection. When will you want them bunched for you?"

"Hold on," said Welsh. "I'm going to look them over myself. This is a Kay Kay deal."

Keith's genial smile gave place to a look of regret.

"No doubt it is a miracle that the three of us have managed to pull together all these months. It was too good to last. This deal is against my judgment. I will stay in the partnership until we have handled and sold these feeders and I have paid my third of the loss."

Gerda's face flamed scarlet.

"If that's the way you feel about it, Don Keith, you'll keep the brand and stay hitched to Mat. I cut loose right

here and now. I'm not going to be ridden by any safety-first milksop!"

"Easy, easy, Miss Gerda," urged Welsh. "I know you'll not go it alone and shut me out of my chance at the profits. This offer was made to the Kay Kay, and the Kay Kay has accepted it."

"Oh, if you're set on siding me against Safety Savings!" The girl tossed a bank note to Tyrrel. "That's Kay Kay money. It takes your feeders, subject to approval."

"Cash on delivery?"

"As good as cash — the check of the Kay Kay, drawn by the senior partner."

The girl looked challengingly at her brother. He signed a blank check, handed it to Welsh, and rose from the table.

"It's another case of Lobo," he said. "That temper of yours, Gerda — you're riding for a fall. As for Mat siding you against me . . . . but I'll not say it. You're the one responsible. This deal is in your hands. I'll have nothing to do with it. The car cannot be trailed over cactus country. I shall drive back the way we came."

"With me?" murmured Pilar. "That long drive — just us two?"

"Hardly, *niña*. People might not realize you are still a school girl. You must stay with Gerda."

His sister's lip curled.

"I can't be bothered with female baggage. Pick up a chaperon who wants a lift to Socorro. I'm going to trail across with the herd."

"Then I am too!" cried Pilar, her black eyes hot with resentment. "Needn't look so uppish, Gerda. You know I can ride——"

"Across the Chupadera Mesa — three days from water to water?" remonstrated Keith. "Why, my dear child——"

"*Santisima!* If you call me that again, I'll scream! You

know *padre's madre* married younger than I am now. Go on, Gerda. Why don't you say it? 'Just like a greaser!' *Poder de Dios!* I'll show you a greaser can ride!"

"Hush, *chiquita,*" soothed Keith. "People are staring. Be a nice good little girl. I'll get you a chaperon——"

She jerked clear of the hand he had placed on her arm.

"I'm not *chiquita* to you! Chaperon—chaperon? Safety first, last, and all the time! You . . . . all right, then. It's just as improper for Gerda, too. I shall chaperon her!"

Keith bowed gravely and left the table, mopping his bald head. His sister turned the unflinching gaze of her beautiful eyes from him to the defiant young girl.

"It's your choice, Pilar. Don't forget that when we hit into the rough. And you'll behave. *Sabe?* If I catch you making eyes at the men when they ought to be on duty, I'll spank you."

Pilar shrank as if struck in the face. She cast a piteous glance after Keith. But he did not look back. She caught Tyrrel's sympathetic eye, and smiled with sugary sweetness.

"At least I'll have my *campeador* for a time. He's not your man, Gerda *dulcisima.* He still wears my colors."

CHAPTER VI

IN THE SADDLE

NEED to arrange for the delivery of the steers gave Tyrrel excuse to break away from the strained situation. It hurt him to see and hear two such lovely girls exchange unpleasantries.

He found the owner of the Lazy S Bar already settled for a quiet evening with three old friends and a poker deck. The one term of the deal that he did not mention to Howbert was the quarter cent that he had saved.

"*Huh,*" grunted the old man. "Kind of thought the price'd fetch 'em. Only thing, it's a sour swallow, Big Mat getting a slice of the cake. Well, Don Keith and Miss Gerdy're all right — and I need the money. How 'bout yours, son? Times've changed. Can't cash my check for that measly little two thousand 'fore I clean up my bank loans. Mebbe, though, by breakfast I'll have the cash."

He gazed speculatively at the card table.

"Nothing due me now, sir," replied Tyrrel. "Those feeders are yet to be accepted."

"Don't you worry any 'bout that, son. They're prime stock. What's more, Miss Gerdy ain't a quitter. She'll hang on even if Mat backs out when he knows I'm behind the deal. On t'other hand, mebbe he'll snap it up, seeing as how it's hitting me under the market."

"When shall I say we'll have the steers ready for inspection?"

"Soon's your buyers care to jog up to the Lazy S Bar. Told Billy Bull, my foreman, to keep 'em bunched. I'll rattle my tin can up-creek first thing tomorrow."

As the cowman spoke, he hospitably followed Tyrrel out into the empty hotel hall.

"You wait and come along with your buyers, son. Was young once my ownself. Them're mighty comely gals."

"And both of them ladies," Tyrrel chimed in with conviction. "As for me, I'm not even a nester. Bird that flies high trying to feather his nest, is apt to be classed as a buzzard. If you had an ambulance, I'd admire your company. Reason I'll stay and ride Ante is that he jogs easier than a flivver."

Howbert spread his bow legs and gnawed at a plug of chewing tobacco.

"Dunno which you're set on, son. Reckon you got the little *señorita* gentled a'ready. Might do worse. Old Kenneth Keith — pa of Apache Keith — went and had a appelectic stroke when his second gal run off with Chavez. All the same, Miguel was mighty white for a sheepman. Come of pedigreed Spanish stock. 'Sides, they's no sheep to bother you now. Don cashed in on 'em at top war prices."

"Mighty interesting, Mr. Howbert. But I'm not——"

"Rather have action, *huh?* Well, I reckon you'll find that there Still Hell hoss ain't got nothing on Miss Gerdy — if it comes down to busting. Mebbe you might gentle her. Women sure are queer critters."

Tyrrel drew out one of Keith's cigars, eyed the band, and replaced the expensive "smoke" in his pocket.

"Too rich for a poor lone puncher. As for busting, I've had enough for a while."

"I might take on another top rider." The cowman's tone was flat, but his eyes glinted.

"Thanks. I'll think about it, Mr. Howbert. We'll come as soon as Miss Keith is ready."

Back in the big new tourist hotel patronized by the Kay Kay, Tyrrel found a roystering mob of rodeo celebrants. They forcibly boosted him up into his silver-mounted, hand-

carved saddle, and clamored for a speech.

Oratory was the last thing he would have dreamed of attempting. But his appeal to be let off met with an uproar of insistence. He would have felt far more comfortable if the gorgeous saddle under him had been on the back of any bucking outlaw — Still Hell excepted. The thought gave him an inspiration. Why not cash in on the enthusiasm of his riotous persecutors?

He jumped upright on the saddle. The wave of his long arm won a sudden hush of expectancy. He struck a pose.

"Friends, Romans —'scuse me! Friends, roamers, and fellow buckaroos, I came not here to talk. I came to ——"

"Ride, cowboy! *r-r-r-ride!*" yelled a moonshine-glamored tourist.

"Guilty!" confessed Tyrrel when the howl of approval quieted. "Anyhow, I didn't come here to dude-wrangle. Fact is, I'm like that boy that stood on the burning deck — or was it the bridge? I'm no gob. All I know is, I'd like to play a game of auction bridge."

"Why not pokah?" inquired a Kentuckian.

"Because there's no bluff in this game. Gentlemen, who wants a memento of the wild and woolly West? I own two saddles and one horse. Can't very well ride him with an upper and lower, like a bunkhouse or a Pullman. Yet more, 'twould grieve my tender heart to see so much elegantly chased silver tarnished by the inclemencies of the weather — not to mention that metal makes a cold seat in winter. Gentlemen, this magnificent silver saddle, first prize of the rodeo, is on the auction block. What do I hear bid?"

The motion-picture cowboy was first to recover from the general astonishment. He perceived a rare opportunity for himself. The actual rodeo saddle, along with a photoplay showing him as hero of a rodeo, would double his popularity as a star. In a tone of careless generosity, he bid seventy-

five dollars. A real puncher snorted and raised him to a hundred. The Kentucky tourist bid twenty-five more.

The picture star had caught his breath. The advertising value of the contest prize was worth far more to him than the saddle had cost. He began to bid up by driblets. The puncher soon reached his limit. Much to the surprise of Tyrrel, his place was taken by Welsh. The young cattleman raised the cautious bids of the tourist and the picture star by twenty-dollar jumps.

At two hundred and fifty dollars the Kentuckian dropped out. Welsh rapidly bid up to three hundred, and stopped. The movie cowboy offered two dollars more. This met with laughter and jeers, but no one raised him, persistently as Tyrrel called for other bids.

His attempt to loosen up the crowd with a funny story failed. Behind his smile he boiled with anger. The price offered was beyond what he had hoped for. But how could he bring himself to let his hard-won prize of honor go to that faker, that sham cowboy? If only he had seized upon Welsh's last bid! Whatever had been Big Mat's purpose in bidding, he was a real cattleman.

Vainly Tyrrel pirouetted around on the beautiful saddle, ready to snap at the slightest raise that would give him excuse to shut out the picture star. The hand-carved, silver-mounted saddle was a work of art. More than one of the tourists had paid thousands for smeared old canvases of doubtful origin. But they were not buying saddles. Welsh held to a tight-jawed silence. Tyrrel could kill no more time.

"One last call," he warned. "Three hundred and two offered. Going at three hundred and two. Going—going——"

"Four hundred!" pealed a bell-like voice from the stairway.

Tyrrel wrenched himself about so suddenly that he almost

toppled from his perch. Gerda Keith stood on the first landing, gazing over the heads of the people below with undisguised scorn. Though uncertain whether her disdain was for himself or for the crowd, Tyrrel managed to choke down his astonishment. He shouted his relief:

"Four hundred bid! Sold to——"

"Four hundred and two!" cried the picture cowboy.

"Five hundred!" rang out Gerda's voice, without an instant's hesitancy.

Tyrrel stared, too astonished to catch at the preposterous bid. The actor frowned with anger, but his lips tightened. Even at a thousand the saddle would be a bargain for him. He must show this derisive bidder that he was in real earnest. His voice took on a note of harsh challenge——

"Five, twenty-five!"

"Five, ninety-eight," mocked the girl.

The crowd had caught its breath. It burst into a hilarious roar. The first lull found the actor spluttering with rage. He had lost his temper. Tyrrel threw up his hands for silence.

"Gentlemen, I told you I wanted to play a game of auction. The game is now closed. You've had your laugh. The joke has gone far enough."

"But the saddle!" shouted the movie star. "I bid six hundred!"

"*Whoa*, sonny. Didn't you hear me? No more auction game. This saddle isn't for sale at any price."

Gerda Keith's face flamed as crimson as the actor's. She flashed a furious glance at Tyrrel and withdrew up the stairway like an offended queen. Her anger perplexed him no less than her whim to bid so extravagantly for the saddle. As old Howbert had said, women certainly were queer creatures.

He dropped to the floor, swung the ornate saddle over his

shoulder, and plowed his way through the milling crowd, out into the night-shadowed street.

Yet dawn found him at the livery stable where the Kay Kay had placed their horses. No matter how greatly the girl had been angered at him, he could not believe she would break her word.

From the adjoining garage rolled a light truck with hard-rubber tires and the equipment of a chuck-wagon — cook's camp-kit and food box and two big water tanks. Before the livery, two Kay Kay horse wranglers and four newly hired hard-bitten punchers were examining a *remuda* or cavvy (cavaya — *caballo* — *caballada*) of nearly forty bronchos.

One of the new punchers was the boar-faced drunkard who had been ripped by his steer in the bulldogging. Lame little Jake, the older wrangler, named him to Tyrrel as Butch, a boyhood friend of Welsh's. Two of the others claimed the same distinction — Slim, a limp beanpole with low forehead and rattlesnake eyes, and Redeye, the wolfish one-eyed fellow who had sneered at Tyrrel for taking part in the sack race.

When Gerda came from the hotel with Welsh and Pilar, her first glance fixed upon Tyrrel in his old saddle on the ugly Ante. He swung off, hat in hand. Without so much as a frigid nod, she drew her cousin past him to where Jake waited with the horses of the party.

Lobo, nervous as usual, danced around the other horses. On his back glinted the polished silver of the contest saddle. Gerda turned upon Tyrrel, her eyes ablaze with emerald fire.

"I'll trouble you to take that off my horse. I am not bound by my bid. You did not accept, and the next bid canceled mine."

"You heard me say, the saddle wasn't for sale," quietly replied Tyrrel.

"It was," contradicted Gerda. "You were taking bids — no play about it."

"The saddle ceased to be on sale, Miss Keith, the instant I gathered that you'd like to own it. If your horse had run straight in the free-for-all, he'd have beaten Ante by a length or more. I took your first money. Won't you take my saddle?"

The appeal struck down Gerda's anger — yet only for a moment. She flared again, more wrathful than before.

"You would have sold it — the honorable trophy of your championship!"

"And you wanted to save it from disgrace. That means it's yours by right," argued Tyrrel. "Take it as a forfeit, if you hold me too low to accept it as a gift."

"A gift of what you do not care to keep!" she scoffed.

"Because it's no use to me, Miss Keith. I've had my fill of contest riding. I'm going to locate in your country."

Though Gerda's gaze did not soften, her color deepened. She turned and leaped upon the prancing thoroughbred with an expert hop mount. It was an ungracious acceptance of the gift, but none the less an acceptance. Welsh frowned.

Tyrrel's face was as expressionless as a good poker player's. He did not smile until he noticed Pilar waiting for him to give her a hand-up. She could have mounted almost as easily as had her cousin. He surmised this, yet hastened to offer his services.

Gerda had on her old slouch hat, new boots, her broad leather belt, a flannel blouse, and a leather-bound divided skirt that had seen hard service. The younger girl's dress was all new and fascinatingly unlike the ungainly mannish riding costume of convention. Her expensive brown cord riding skirt had the flair cut of Mexican *chaparajos*. Its hand-carved leather trimmings were embossed with silver studs. Her blouse of silk-wool matched the scarlet of her Cupid's-bow lips. For belt she wore a Spanish long-tasseled sash-girdle of bright blue silk. The broad brim of her velours

sombrero tilted up on one side and down on the other in a Gainsborough curve. Its silver band sparkled with garnets.

The foot that she confided to Tyrrel's hand hardly filled his palm. It was shod in miniature cowboy boots of silky leather, embossed on the tops with silver diamonds and hearts. The gauntlet of the little hand that she placed on his shoulder had almost the texture of satin.

She paused to smooth the folds of the scarlet blouse while Welsh and old Jake loped off after Gerda. Through the lowered fringes of their long lashes her black eyes noted with a somber look Tyrrel's amused admiration.

"How does it strike you, *campeador mio?*" she asked. "Gerda nearly had a fit. That is why I bought the make-up. Best of the joke, she couldn't deny it's all as useful as it's ornamental."

"Come to look at it, that's true," Tyrrel admitted his surprise over the fact. "Don't tell me Mr. Keith has missed the picture."

Pilar was up in the saddle before Tyrrel could give her his intended lift. Her voice quivered with scorn.

"What do I care what he thinks — the mean old baldy! He left in the car right after dinner, without giving me the chance to show him."

"His loss, Miss Chavez. The sight of you would gladden the eyes of a blind fish."

"He's not a fish," snapped the girl. "You're blind yourself not to see he's the best and kindest and ——"

Her horse jumped to the jab of her pretty silver spurs. Tyrrel swung up into his saddle and meditatively struck a match to the last of Keith's cigars.

"Ante horse, they've got me guessing. Begins to look as if old Howbert of the Hackareeyas has a head as long as yours. Women — women — 'queer critters' is right."

CHAPTER VII

QUIJOTE D'ARTAGNAN

UNTIL evening Tyrrel had a good chance to study Gerda's straight lithe back. She kept in the lead with Welsh. The road was wide enough for three riders abreast. Tyrrel had expected to trail behind with the newly hired Kay Kay punchers. But at the very first, instead of joining her cousin and Welsh, Pilar had signed for him to ride with her.

She seemed to have forgotten her petulance. She smiled and chatted and proved herself an altogether charming little road mate. Nor was she less fascinating when, with the uproll of the sun, she put on a Spanish lady's riding mask. The coquettish glances of her black eyes over the rim of the mask were more than ever alluring.

Tyrrel jogged along beside her, very willing to enjoy her piquant companionship. It was virtually a *tête-à-tête*. They rode far enough back of the leaders to avoid their dust. For the same reason, the cook rumbled the chuck-truck the same distance behind them. The Kay Kay riders and horse herd strung out half a mile or more in the rear.

The situation, as well as the coquetry of the young girl, offered Tyrrel a rare opportunity to ingratiate himself with her. He went no further than a half-amused and wholly good-natured parrying of her advances. He lacked the conceit to believe she could be in earnest. If she was, then matter-of-fact honesty, he felt, required him to avoid taking advantage of her innocent impulsiveness.

Not that she failed to stir him. On the contrary, her charm more than once quickened his pulse and brought a

glow into his ruddy brown eyes. She was a delightful little beauty. It would have been easy enough to have let himself go — to have plunged head over heels in love with her. She possessed all the coquetry of a Spanish *señorita*, coupled — seemingly at least — with the artlessness of a child.

This last restrained him even while it quickened his tenderness. In addition, he felt two other restraints. The first was his knowledge of her wealth. He was "on the make," but not in that way. For another thing, every break in the dust cloud of the riders ahead showed him the erect form of Gerda Keith. The sun glinted on the silver-rimmed cantle of the saddle that she had accepted from him.

At noon the party ate a cold snack, washed down with lukewarm water from one of the chuck-truck tanks. Gerda coldly ignored her cousin, asked Tyrrel two or three businesslike questions about the feeders, and jogged on again with Welsh.

She held the pace to a running-walk or a jog-trot a good part of the day. Camp was pitched that evening in the mesquites at the crossing of a creek, rather over thirty miles out from Roswell.

Towards the end of the long hours under the blazing sun Pilar's plump little figure had drooped. At supper she was almost feverishly vivacious. She won smiles from all the circle of men around the camp fire — even from Slim and Redeye, Butch and Mack, the four ill-favored new punchers hired by Welsh for the drive. But she found excuse to withdraw early to the little tarpaulin tent.

Gerda followed her departure with a look of grave approval.

"Pretty good. Still soft from the convent, yet not a whimper. I've an idea she won't be numbered among the drags, Mat, at trail's end."

"What else did you expect?" said Welsh. "She's got

Keith blood."

The indirect compliment won him a gracious smile from Gerda. They started to talk about Service and Henley, her favorite poets. He had studied up on them, and took turn about with the girl reciting lines or whole verses, until drowsiness sent her to join her cousin in the tent. All the time she had given as little heed to Tyrrel as to the four newly hired riders.

But over-night her mood towards the Coloradoan changed. In the cool gray dawn she met him at the breakfast fire with a hearty handclasp.

"That silver saddle was made for me, Dick. I'm right glad it did not go to that movie cowboy."

"Same here, Miss Keith. There are plenty of real honest-to-goodness punchers in the pictures. But he's a faker. Made me doubly glad to put the saddle where it belonged."

"*Mil gracias!*" Gerda gave thanks. "What d'you say to a lope? Enough dragging to come when we trail those feeders. I'm keen to look them over. Can we make it by noon?"

"It's close upon thirty miles."

The girl's eyes narrowed.

"I see now why you didn't mention where we'd find your steers. Jake tells me, if we keep going the way we're headed, we'll land at the Lazy S Bar. As well you didn't tell Mat. Old Jacarilla Howbert's first veal was alleged to have been suckled by Welsh cows. He and One-Gun argued out the matter with their six-shooters. It happened to be the first time that Mat's dad failed to get his man. While he was laid up for repairs, Jacarilla shifted his calves to a healthier range."

"That's ancient history."

"But there's more. Years later, when Mat was twelve or fourteen, he and his dad met-up with Jacarilla. This time

both One-Gun and Hack were laid out, but Hack had rather the better of the discussion. You don't suppose Mat has forgotten that, do you?"

"What of it? This deal is between the Kay Kay and me."

"Yes. Old Hack is long-headed enough to stay behind cover. Stick to your option story. It may keep Mat from breaking loose. Jacarilla must be mired down in a bad slough — offering a deal to the Kay Kay with Mat a partner. Below the market, too!"

"It's my offer, not his."

"Well, I hope that means you have the old rapscallion brand-blotter so roped and hog-tied that you can strip the hide off him. What commission do you figure to collect? If that's not asking."

"About two thousand."

"No more than that? Thought you were on the make! Don't be so soft. If he's in a bad hole, he'll have to pay whatever you ask for snaking him out. Don't forget, he got his start by rustling."

"Never was good on history, Miss Keith, and I'm not a Kay Kay man — yet. All I know is, Mr. Howbert was white to me. You saw him side me when I made my get-away from Still Hell."

"What! that handy gran'dad with the snake medicine? So that was old Hack How? Why, even Mat didn't know him. Bet with him against your riding Still Hell — and lost the bet! What a joke on Mat!"

"Better mislay his gun for him," suggested Tyrrel. "I'll go bail that Mr. Howbert keeps his out of action."

The mirthful sparkle in Gerda's eyes chilled to a cold glitter.

"You forget that Mr. Welsh is my partner. What right have you to think I'd meddle with his private affairs? He

will settle his score with Jacarilla Howbert as he sees fit."

"Mebbe so — mebbe so," good-humoredly replied Tyrrel. "As your brother says — *Quien sabe? Sabe Dios.* From what you've told me about the results of the old man's two arguments with Mr. Welsh's father, I have an idea the score is more apt to be settled according to Howbert's notions."

The point drove home. Gerda nodded.

"You're right. He knows Mat is coming. He'll be loaded for bear. I'll leave Mat in charge of Pilar and the outfit, while we breeze ahead to see if the feeders are ready for inspection."

Tyrrel offered no objection. On the other hand, he betrayed little enthusiasm. When, during breakfast, Gerda announced the arrangement, he met Pilar's exclamation of disappointment with sincere regrets over the loss of her company. This did not altogether disarm Welsh's resentment.

"Why rush off ahead, Miss Gerda?" he muttered. "Half a day will make no difference, and — you know nothing about this fellow."

"I'll be safer with him than you with Pilar. No use your kicking cactus, Mat. It's settled."

Welsh made no more attempts to argue. But after the forerunners left camp, Pilar found several enticing leads necessary before she could distract the attention of her cavalier for the day.

Gerda held the champing Lobo to an easy lope only for the first mile. After that she gradually let him out, quite as eager as he for a long-distance race. Though bored, Ante took it as part of the day's work. When Lobo tuned up from canter to gallop and gallop to full run, he lengthened his own stride to suit. At times the thoroughbred outsprinted him. But on the rising ground he always came up again, neck and neck.

By the end of the second hour the horses had covered

more than twenty miles. Ante had not turned a hair. Lobo showed streaks of white lather on his glossy roan coat. But this was due to his fretfulness. Either horse could have held to the same pace for another two hours. When they slowed to a walk, it was not because they had tired. Gerda chose to talk.

"That's a bag of live bones under you, Dick. Clumsy looking as a bear, and no less nimble. What does he remind me of?"

"Well, there was D'Artagnan's orange-hued nag. Or how about the still more famous steed of Don Quixote?"

"Rosinante!"

"His namesnake. Ante for short."

Gerda's laughter burst out with a bell-like ring that side-jumped Lobo across the road.

"Ante, for short! And what's his rider for long? Don Quijote de la Mancha, or D'Artagnan of the King's Musketeers, most devoted servitor of the queen?"

Tyrrel grinned.

"I might scare up a windmill, if I had a lance. As for a queen to fight for, how about present company—Her Majesty of the Kay Kay? Only trouble, my trusty blade is in a jack-knife."

"Lance and rapier are back numbers. You pack a gun."

"'Scuse me, ma'am. I ain't aimin' to be no gunman. Never did cotton to life in them there big cities. We're not out here where the West begins. We're where it's done finished sowin' and reapin' its wild oats and's settled down to nurse its infant industries. I lug my little ol' popper on'y because it's handy for skunks and rattlers and mad coyotes."

This time Gerda's laugh held a note of mockery.

"O heroic knight of the rodeo, what's become of your lady's colors? Rattlers and coyotes of the two-legged variety are still found west of the Mississippi. You may have a

chance to smoke 'em up in honor of your *dulcinea.*"

Tyrrel made grave pretense of searching his shirt front.

"Why! Those colors have done faded away — yet she didn't notice it. I call that flattering!"

Gerda studied his solemn face with a cold gaze. Was he trying to infer that she, who had noticed, was more interested in him than was the owner of the colors?

"Flattery is the word, Don Quijote D'Artagnan. Pilar probably was too intent upon gazing into your eyes. You men like that sort of thing. But don't blame her if you get your fingers burnt. She's only a child and she can't help it. It's in her blood — from her *padre's* side. She started to flirt before she was out of her crib."

"Count me out of the running, Miss Keith. I learned that your brother is riding herd on a big bunch of money that carries her brand. I haven't a cow."

"What has that to do with it? You're free, white and American."

"Free — yes. I own a horse and a rope. I can run off and hang myself if I want to. Only I won't. Too American for that. As for white — hope I'm enough so not to take on a yellow streak, even if it's golden yellow."

The mockery in Gerda's eyes flashed into scorn.

"You're yellow clean through if you're afraid of a girl's money. A real American can ride his own horse to win, however heavily handicapped with his wife's gold bricks."

Tyrrel paused to feel his breast and pockets as if to locate Pilar's missing colors.

"Long as you put it that way, Miss Keith, don't know but what I'll think about it."

Gerda first flushed, then whitened. The rowels of her spurs dug hard into the flanks of the thoroughbred. In his first outraged rush the roan sailed over the wire gate of the fence that bounded the near end of the Lazy S Bar range. Gerda

made no attempt to curb him all the nine miles up-creek to the ranch.

The big corral guided her to the old log ranch house hidden in the thicket-bordered grove of cottonwoods. The sun was still only half way up the eastern sky. She found the Mexican cook alone under the open-shed kitchen.

Dumbfounded by the sudden vision of the hot-faced, cold-eyed *doña Americana*, the flustered Mexican could only jabber. She flung the reins over Lobo's tossing head and sprang off to look in the house. The bunk and mess rooms showed signs of crude masculine attempts at house cleaning, but all were unoccupied. Outside, the still incoherent cook managed to focus his gestures in a point across the creek.

After twice coming up alongside Gerda during the run from the drift fence, Tyrrel had taken the hint that his company was not wanted. He had trailed far enough behind to avoid Lobo's dust.

From near the corral he sighted the peak of a familiar old hat disappearing around a knoll, up aslant the creek. As Ante's quickened gallop brought him to the knoll, he glanced back and saw Gerda spur Lobo out of the grove on the opposite side of the channel. She started to race across the broad sandy bed of the trickling stream. His hail veered her his way, and also brought the departing rider face about.

The old man jogged back to greet him, without a trace of surprise or pleasure.

"Howdy, son. So you thought you'd come on ahead of——"

Checked by the thud of Lobo's hoofs, he glared past Tyrrel under his down-bushing eyebrows. His hand dropped to the hilt of his old Colt.

"By ginger, buster kid, if you're capping for Big Mat, I'll plug you first crack and——"

Again he stopped short. His hand groped up from his

hip, to fumble with his hat.

"G'day, ma'am. Didn't look to see you 'fore sundown."

Gerda swirled her plunging horse around so that she could face both men.

"What's the idea?" she demanded. "Hiding out here! Are you trying to put something up on me or on Mr. Welsh?"

"No'um, not as I know of—leastways not now," replied Howbert. He fished out a worn twenty-five-cent piece and held it before the angry eyes of the girl. "I ain't got nothing to do with any deal 'twixt you and this buster kid. Look for your ownself. Here's what he paid me to bind his option. It's legal as all cash down."

The absurdity of the subterfuge proved more than Gerda could resist. She burst into one of her full-lunged laughs.

"That's no lie, Mr. Howbert. Legal is right. The joke's on the Kay Kay. As well, though, not to tell it to Mr. Welsh. He might not find it so funny."

"I'm not hunting trouble, ma'am."

"All right. I want the deal to go through. Where are those white-face yearlings?"

"A right smart jaunt up-creek, Miss Gerdy. Best come back to the house and set till we get a feed."

But Gerda was more set on seeing the feeders. She led the way up-creek at a lope. The young steers had been allowed to scatter in the choice pasture above the bunching ground. Gerda started to inspect them. At noon she and Tyrrel shared the lunches of Howbert and his battered, red-headed old foreman Billy Bull. She did not quit the inspecting until late in the afternoon.

CHAPTER VIII

OLD FEUDS — NEW FEUDS

WELSH had not permitted the Kay Kay outfit to lag on the road. It was going into camp, half a mile up-creek from the ranch house when Gerda jogged back with Tyrrel and Howbert.

As they came near, Welsh signed for Pilar to wait beside the truck. He swung out away from her. Slim and Redeye, two of his boyhood friends, sidled around to where they could get a clear view of Howbert. Tyrrel had not been charmed by any one of the four tough-looking men hired by Welsh. Something sinister in the actions of this ugly pair caused him to push up alongside the old cowman. Gerda spurred ahead.

"Rope it, Mat," she advised. "Mr. Howbert says he is not hunting for trouble."

"Like as not, but——"

"Nor are you—not with Pilar around. If you think the statute of limitations hasn't wiped out your debt against Jacarilla, you'll at least put off your collecting till Pilar is clear away."

"Oh, don't mind me," politely deprecated the young girl. "I'm not at all nervous. It's not as if they didn't know how to shoot."

Welsh kept his watchful gaze fixed upon Tyrrel and Howbert.

"I'll not be the first to draw, Gerda. But I want to say I have two men here as ready for action as myself. Now I'm going to give my opinion of the deal that Jacarilla and this fellow Tyrrel have cooked up against the Kay Kay.

I haven't seen that old rustler since he shot up dad. If he hadn't changed so — if I'd known him there at the rodeo ——"

"'Twouldn't 'a' been *Still* Hell only," grunted Howbert.

"You've said it."

"Yeppe. That's agreed, unanimous. Next comes my say 'bout now. Mebbe I got sort of old-fashioned notions in my *cabeza*. I don't disremember they's ladies present. 'Twouldn't be polite to muss you all up, right before 'em. Supposing you take back that there appellation which you used to designate me by. Leastways, I'll ask you to back up on it *pro tempo*. Your dad ain't the only man got leaded for calling me that."

"The right word but the wrong time," gibed Welsh. "I'll take it back — for future use. But this deal is a horse of another color. You knew me from the first. My name was on the list of contestants. You schemed with Tyrrel to gouge me. If it's not that — if it isn't a crooked deal, then you're mired. Otherwise you'd never have sold to my outfit at a quarter cent under market."

Howbert slued around to bore into Tyrrel's eyes with a gimlet stare.

"Quarter cent under? Is it a crooked deal?"

"It is not."

"You ain't double-crossing me?"

"No."

"That's your say-so, buster kid. Lord help you if you're lying! Now, Mr. Welsh, do your jawing to him. Miss Gerdy'll tell you it's his herd. He's got a legal option on it."

Welsh flushed purple.

"Pretty slick! You don't put over a dodge like that on me. The deal is off."

"Hold on, Mat," interposed Gerda. "The Kay Kay closed with Mr. Tyrrel's offer. A bargain's a bargain."

"Not if made under false pretenses. Don voted against it. If I'd known that this — this fellow Howbert ——"

"All right, then. Have your own way. That leaves me free to go it alone. I've seen the steers. They look good to me. Mr. Tyrrel, if it's the same thing to you, I'll take back that Kay Kay bank note, and give you my check to ——"

Up shot Welsh's hand to clutch Lobo's bridle as if the girl were about to dash away from him.

"Wait, Gerda! You can't mean it. You can't pull out of the partnership like this. I won't stand for it!"

Gerda reached for the plaited horsehair quirt that hung from her saddlehorn.

"Let go my bridle. That's better. Now I'll tell you where you get off, Mat Welsh. It's your privilege to settle your private squabbles to suit yourself. Only you'll not mix them with the business of the Kay Kay. Our outfit has made a bargain. We're going to keep it. Those feeders are prime young steers — not over a handful of scrubs in the whole herd. Do you think I've gone blind?"

"I — Good Lord, Gerda, I'm not doubting your judgment. Only ——"

"I've named the only 'only' in this deal. Tomorrow Dick will make delivery, and you'll stand ready to fill in Donnie's check to him."

Welsh signed to Slim and Redeye, and turned away with a look whose bitterness was tempered with relief. Beyond all shadow of doubt, the girl would have carried out the threat to leave the partnership. He could swallow almost anything to head off that disaster.

But he could not bring himself to accept Howbert's hospitable invitation for all to take supper at the ranch. Everyone else caught at the chance. Even Cookie, the fat cook, went to test his Mexican rival's *chili con carne* and *frijoles*,

tamales, paper-thin *tortillas* and honey-sweet *dulces*.

While Welsh sat alone, staring hard into the dying camp fire, the satiated feasters down at the ranch house grouped before the glowing little fireplace and listened to his old enemy drawl grewsome tales of the Lincoln County war. The cowman omitted neither the names of participants nor the details of treachery, rustling, and murder.

Pilar crouched on a wolfskin, tense and spellbound by the fascination of horror. Gerda appeared even more fascinated, but her feeling was not based upon abhorrence. Her gray-green eyes glinted and flashed as she egged on the old man from one frightful account to another.

The four, ill-favored, new punchers of the Kay Kay glowered at him and each other. They came of Lincoln County families, three of whom had sided with One-Gun Welsh's faction. Butch's red face took on the look of an angered razorback boar. Redeye sneered with the ferocity of a one-eyed gray wolf. Slim sat very still, his twisted face blank but his white eyes glittering under his receding forehead with the cold malevolence of a rattlesnake. The fourth man, Mack, watched the three with wary sidelong glances, his hand close to the butt of his gun. But Howbert only grinned and blandly went on rasping the sons of his former enemies. They sat and took it all. They knew the old man's reputation.

Of all the company, Tyrrel alone sat through the evening with neither relish or bitterness.

"Thanks be, those days are past," he said, when Gerda reluctantly rose to leave. "A man now has a chance to keep the peace without having first to shoot his neighbors to pieces."

"Let the same conditions come around again, you'd be in the thick of them," predicted Gerda.

"I might. But the minute they started going, I'd start

going, too — for elsewhere. I'd run like a scared jackrabbit."

Howbert grinned at the back of the dour-faced out-lurching punchers.

"Don't you be too sure 'bout that, son. Man never can tell what he'll do when he gets in a fracas. Country's all fenced up, though, now. No chance for an outsider to bust in. No free grass left."

"Except the Tabru range," qualified Gerda.

"Dry," grunted the cowman. "Ain't it a shame? Grass to your knee, and might 's well be a alkali flat."

During the ride up to camp Pilar squeaked an alarm over every vague shape that loomed in the darkness. Each time she swung her horse close to Ante. At the camp she drew rein in the shadow of the truck. When Tyrrel sought to hand her down, she contrived to slip and fall into his arms.

She was as soft and cuddly as a kitten. Tyrrel had good excuse to hold her fast and take toll from her scarlet lips. Instead, like her, he feigned an awkward slip of his grasp. It thrust her off from him, almost upsetting her.

"*Whew!* What a bungle!" he apologized. "Mighty dark here. Hope it didn't hurt you, Miss Chavez."

"You'd not have bungled if I'd been Gerda!"

Tyrrel chuckled.

"Good reason. She's always on and off before a man can lend a hand."

The girl stamped her little foot.

"You've had your last chance with me!"

He caught her dainty head between his hands, stooped, and gave her a brusque kiss full upon her pouting lips.

"There, little girl, that will show you. Now take your dollie and go home."

She slashed at him with her quirt, but he was already beyond reach of the lash.

In the morning Gerda did not rout out the younger girl

for breakfast. When at dawn she rode off with the men, Pilar still lay in the little tarpaulin tent, asleep or pretending to sleep. She was left to brood alone all morning. Cookie had his hands full, filling the water-tanks and tinkering the truck engine.

The others were no less busy, up at the bunching ground. Gerda, Welsh, Tyrrel and Howbert made tally of the young steers as the Lazy S Bar riders drifted the herd across the creek and up a cut-bank gully. At the head of the narrow little arroyo the animals were taken in charge by the Kay Kay punchers.

The rebranding of the steers was left to be done after they had been trailed to the Kay Kay range. Gerda wished to get Welsh away from the Lazy S Bar as soon as possible. Yet even without the delay of branding, hours were required to make the delivery. The more cunning steers hid in the chaparral up and down the creek.

But the last strays were finally driven in. As they clattered past, up the arroyo, Gerda drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

"One thousand, seventeen. What do you make it, Dick?"

"Fifteen."

"Eleven," corrected Welsh. "What's more, that last bunch of seven ——"

"They don't belong, by rights," broke in Howbert. "Good stock but wild. Mavericks we combed out the bosques with other outlaw cattle last round-up. Le's call the tally a even thousand. Easier to figger in round numbers."

"What would you say they average?" asked Tyrrel. "Wait. We'll each write down our guess."

Welsh frowned, suspicious of a catch. Yet the figures of the other side could not bind him unless he chose to accept them. He jotted down his estimate on the paper which Gerda had folded over in turn for Tyrrel and Howbert, after

noting her own guess. To his surprise, Howbert's estimate came within ten pounds of his own. Gerda's was twenty-five higher, and Tyrrel's fifty lower.

The big man's blue eyes gleamed.

"You're the seller, Tyrrel. We'll accept your figure."

"No, we'll not," differed Gerda. "Dick is from Colorado. Maybe eighteen-month steers don't run quite so heavy up there this time of year. Anyway, we'll average our four estimates, and figure on that."

"Fair enough, Miss Gerdy," grunted Howbert.

Tyrrel said nothing. But behind the expressionless mask of his face he considered the two buyers. Welsh had shown his true colors. Though he carried his head high and eyed everyone with a straightforward look, he was at heart greedy, unscrupulous and vindictive.

Not so easy to place Gerda. High-tempered and brave; the reverse of mean-spirited; hard, yet not lacking a sense of humor; shrewd in a deal, without being ungenerous; strong and skillful; keen upon adventure that spelled danger to herself or others; fair-minded in a way, yet capable of suggesting that another take advantage of a bogged associate.

Of course, however, she had looked upon Jacarilla Howbert from Welsh's viewpoint. She apparently had known of the old cowman only as her partner's personal enemy and a despicable cattle-thief. Was she really as hard as she appeared? Would marriage or motherhood soften her?

Her clear brain was swiftly multiplying the estimated average weight of the steers by the agreed price per pound. Welsh checked her calculations with grim deliberation. He found no mistakes.

The old cowman shook his head and handed the paper over to Tyrrel.

"Left my specs to home. Can't see close up 'thout'em. You tally for me, son. Reckon, at a quarter cent under

market, it figgers some'ers round fifty thousand."

"Almost fifty-two," said Tyrrel. "I'll not trouble to go over Miss Keith's figures. If Mr. Welsh will fill out the check to me, I'll endorse it to you. The balance due me out of it, I'll leave in your hands until I have use for the money."

"No, by—" Welsh stifled the oath, half uttered. "What did I tell you, Gerda? You see now it's all a cooked up deal."

Gerda snapped the check out of his fingers.

"I told you, Mat, this is Kay Kay business. How'll I make this out, Mr. Tyrrel? Dick or Richard?"

"Either goes, Miss Keith."

"Richard, then. Wasn't it Dick the Lion-hearted who came into his kingdom because Walter Tyrrel slipped an arrow into King William Red-head? No, that was Dick's granddad, wasn't it? At any rate, we get Richard and Tyrrel together here — this how."

She wrote the name in a hand as bold and clear as Welsh's, filled in the amount, and countersigned the check. She thrust it and the indelible pencil at her partner.

"You too, Mat. Donnie's fist is enough. Mine double cinches it. But I want Mr. Tyrrel to feel absolutely sure there's going to be no come-back on this deal."

"If it was anyone else than you!" muttered Welsh.

The girl smiled. His yielding was no light compliment to the charm of her beauty, if not to the power of her will.

Tyrrel took the doubly countersigned check and endorsed it to Howbert. But the old cowman waved it back.

"Hold on," he said, his face as emotionless as a piece of weather-bleached leather. "I aim to square accounts all round, right now. Here's my checkbook. My check'll be good, minute I hit into town. Write out what I owe you. I can sign 'thout seeing clear. Wouldn't mind having you

as witness, Miss Gerdy."

Rather surprised, but not at all unwilling, Tyrrel wrote the check. Howbert laboriously signed with an illegible scrawl and waddled around beside Gerda.

"If you don't mind reading it out loud, ma'am. What's she say?"

"It reads, 'Pay to the order of Richard Tyrrel two thousand dollars.'"

The old man pushed up his hat and drew the back of his hand across his wrinkled forehead.

"Son, I own up, the joke's on me. I was all set to plug you. Agreement was, you got a couple thousand. You went and fixed the deal a quarter cent higher'n I said. Looked sort of like you was figgering on hornswoggling me out of the difference."

"I considered it white of you giving me the option," replied Tyrrel. "You said you'd take half a cent under the market, but you didn't fix that as the price. There was no reason why I shouldn't get you more if I could."

Gerda's face flooded with hot color.

"So that was it? You took advantage of my friendliness to work me in favor of a — man like this?"

Tyrrel silently endorsed the check and added to it a sheaf of bank notes out of his rodeo prize money. The girl drew back from his out-reaching hand, more angry than before.

"Keep your sneak pay!"

"It's the quarter cent difference, Miss Keith. Since you believe my playing fair with Mr. Howbert was playing crooked with you, the least I can do now is to cut down your payment to the half cent under market. I may be on the make, but it is the first time I ever stood in the middle of a deal and had both ends try to brand me a double-crosser."

The old cowman snorted like one of his steers.

"*Hough!* Dammit, son, I eat crow. Stick your wad

back into your jeans. You've went and got in bad with Miss Gerdy trying to do me a good turn. That quarter cent's on me. Here — make out my check to the Kay Kay for it."

The generous offer failed to move Tyrrel. He continued to stand with the check and bank notes outheld to the girl. The scarlet of her flush deepened to crimson.

Naturally enough, Welsh thought he saw an opportunity to regain lost ground. He stepped in protectingly beside the girl.

"Leave the fellow to me, Gerda. I'll soon settle his insolence."

"You'll shy clear, Mat. I'm running this." Gerda put out her hand towards Tyrrel, palm outward. "You've downed your windmill, Don Quijote, first tilt. I back up. The money is yours, squarely earned. I'll not take a cent of it. But I'll take your hand, if you're willing to call quits."

Tyrrel gravely accepted the unexpected apology. The vibrant clasp of the girl's strong hand, her smile, the glow in her lovely gray-green eyes, combined to set his nerves tingling. The blood leaped in his veins. Yet he succeeded in masking all outward signs of his intense pleasure.

"Quits suits me, Miss Keith."

Most men she knew — Welsh included — would have sought to curry favor by displaying more appreciation for her graciousness. The Coloradoan took it too much as a matter of course. She stiffened.

"Then the deal is settled. You've made your delivery and received your pay. I take it, you'll be hitting the back trail. *Adios*."

The polite indifference of her tone redoubled the sting of the words. They took for granted that he was about to leave — and her tone said she did not care. Yet, hard hit

as he was, he did not wince. His own tone sounded no less indifferent.

"I'm not altogether sure about back-trailing, Miss Keith. Mr. Howbert spoke of taking me on. I told him I'd think it over."

"No, think *now*," put in the cowman. "You're here, son, and I reckon you'll stay. I got nary kith nor kin. I'll give you a tryout. If you make good, wintering with the Lazy S Bar, mebbe I might figger on letting you chip in your wad for the little end of a partnership."

"Sounds good," said Tyrrel. "If you don't mind, though, I'll first look around a bit."

Welsh broke into a short, harsh laugh.

"No use bluffing. You two can't pull the wool over my eyes. You've been in cahoots since before the rodeo."

"Easy, Mat — ease off," advised Gerda, veering about in a gust of contrariety. "Dick promised he'd consider hiring to me. Jake says one of the new men — the one called Mack — has quit. He pulled out before dawn. Bad blood between him and the other three, stirred up by Mr. Howbert's reminiscences last night. That leaves us short-handed. We'll need Dick on the dry trail from Gallinas."

"Not if I ride herd myself," said Welsh. "You know I can't stand for a Lazy S Bar man in our outfit."

"He's not one yet." The girl smiled confidently at Tyrrel and the old cowman. "I'm counting on you, Dick, to help me out. It's not going to be easy, trailing the herd west from the railroad. I'm sure Mr. Howbert will hold open his offer to you — to oblige me."

"Sure, Miss Gerdy. The boy's welcome to take all the time he's a mind to, just so he don't wait till I dry up and blow away."

Tyrrel nodded acknowledgment, swung upon Ante, and jogged off towards the herd. He did not speak to Gerda.

If he had so much as looked at her before mounting, he must have jumped into the air and cracked his heels together.

He would have been willing to beg permission to join the Kay Kay. Yet he had bluffed the girl. He had stood pat, and she had been the one to give in. He was on the outfit at her urging and as a favor to her.

CHAPTER IX

HARD TO HANDLE

UNCERTAIN whether to be pleased or annoyed over Tyrrel's unceremonious going, Gerda gazed after him in tight-lipped silence. Howbert had been gnawing the end of his tobacco plug. He spat and squinted hard at Welsh.

"Reckon that boy'll make a right smart cowman, some these days."

"Too smart — if he sides the wrong outfit," thrust Welsh. "I'm not through with you yet — nor with him."

"Wait, Mat! I told you ——"

"We haven't our bill of sale, Gerda. We're not through with this deal till we get it. That's sound business. How do we know where the Lazy S Bar got those feeders?"

The reputed former rustler did not reach for his gun. There was a lady present. His twisted grin bared a single tobacco-stained tooth. His voice showed no trace of feeling.

"Brands hereabouts ain't easy to blot with the Lazy S Bar — like the old Welsh W Bar — and you don't pick up mavericks now'days like when 'twas all open range."

"Besides, we get our bill of sale from Dick," put in Gerda. "Yours goes to him."

The old man's sneer smoothed into a smile.

"I'm 'bliged you kept me from disremembering, ma'am. They ain't going to be any come-back on the boy if I can help it."

He jogged down-creek with the partners and went on to the ranch house. As the Kay Kay outfit was breaking camp, he came back to hand Gerda his bill of sale. It was made out to "Dik Teral" and duly witnessed by three Lazy S

Bar riders.

"There you are, Miss Gerdy. The young buster can sign that over to you, or make out his own. Suit yourself. The boy's white. I'd like you should head him back 'fore long. I'm minded to do well by him."

Gerda's straight brows came together.

"Are you sure it would be doing him a good turn? Anybody tying up with the Lazy S Bar ——"

Howbert broke in with some little irritation.

"You ain't got any call to talk so uppity, ma'am. They didn't never prove it. 'Sociating with me won't brand him as side-kick to a jailbird. All us old-timers done more or less rustling — your pa included. Only difference, I didn't have cows enough to match up the calves. It made 'em look like they had all went in for twins."

The corners of Gerda's red lips quirked, but her eyes did not flicker.

"I can remember when your brand was called the Sneaky Snake."

"Not now'days, though —'less it was by Big Mat; and he wouldn't say it more'n once in *my* hearing. No'um; soon's I got my range stocked up, my cows stopped having twins."

"Well, in that case —" Gerda paused to tap her boot top with the buckskin thong of her braided-hair quirt. "I have an idea that Dick Tyrrel thinks things over, and then does pretty much as he dam' pleases."

"That's him, all hunkydory. Only I want you shouldn't say *whoa* to him if he pleases to head back thisaway. Which reminds me, Miss Gerdy. I knowed your pa, and I've heard tell 'bout your brother. He's white. You and him make the Kay Kay two-thirds the same. If I was you, I'd turn back that bunch of wild steers. You'll find they won't ——"

"Pretty soft for you!" cut in Gerda. "No, thanks. You made delivery — called it round numbers. Our thousand head

will shrink enough on the trail."

"That's just why I—" The cowman stopped at sight of Welsh riding around the end of the truck. He spat, grunted, and turned his horse homewards. "G'day, ma'am. It's your own fun'ral 'bout them renegades."

In response to Welsh's query, Gerda merely showed him the bill of sale. She was very angry over Howbert's suggestion. Had he asked straight out for the seven steers, she would readily have given them back to him. But it made her furious to think that the sneaky old rustler should have tried to work her for the gift under pretense of doing the Kay Kay a good turn. Did he take her for a fool?

To tell Welsh, however, might explode the dynamite of his long-cherished hatred against his own and his father's old enemy. The pressing need was to get the herd of steers safe away without any gun play. She owed that much to her brother, if not to herself. Against Donald's judgment, she had insisted upon making the deal. It must be carried through without any hitch.

Mid-afternoon they came up with the herd, drifting along the bench land parallel with the creek bottom. Being frisky and unaccustomed to trailing, the young steers were proving a big handful for the punchers. Every man, in turn, hastened to change horses. Even Ante was hot from the continual sprinting to head back steers that dashed for the chapparal along the creek bank.

Gerda and Pilar joined in the chase. Welsh, followed by the bumping chuck-truck, rode ahead to pick out a bed ground. At sunset the white-faces, rather less frisky after the seven-mile drive, shuffled past the truck and supper fire. By twilight they were milled and bedded down in a close-packed circular mass.

Supper found everyone in good humor. Lively as had been the riding, the long drive was well begun. Not even the

bunch of wild steers had been able to break clear in their many dashes for freedom.

Welsh himself forgot his ill-humor against Tyrrel and joined in the good-natured jests and gibes around the camp fire. But no one lingered before its dying glow. With the exception of the night horse-wrangler and the first relief of the night guard, all, including the girls, hunted their blankets. Voices soon died away. The camp became still.

With the fading of the day, the brilliant light of the full moon had glamored alike the bald plain and tree-fringed creek bottom. From far away came the distance-mellowed yelps of a coyote. The young white-faces were still on their own familiar range. Not even the wild bunch proved restless. All remained quiet where they had lain down.

Tyrrel walked his night horse round and round the bedded herd, keeping opposite Redeye, his fellow guard. As he rode he hummed a trail ballad far older than himself. At every pause between verses he heard the lilting ditty of his watch mate. Redeye was singing an obscene dance-hall song, but his throaty notes blurred the vile words into a meaningless jumble of melody. From the intervening space came the contented sigh of the "breathing acres." A humorous thought flickered across the serenity of Tyrrel's own content.

"Back again to lullabying beef! Oh, well, less pay but more play — and not so jolty as sitting on Still Hell. Pay, cowboy? Man alive! what's the play itself but pay? Own up — you'd be glad to shell out your bottom dollar for the privilege of riding in sight of her. Talk about the face of Helen that knocked over the walls of Troy. I know a face that'd raise the roof — every roof — in Albany and New York!"

At the end of the third hour, when the new relief was called, he rolled into his blankets, still afloat in pleasant reveries. His closed eyes opened inwardly upon a dream-

vision of Gerda. Her crazy roan Lobo was side-jumping up among the stars. She wore a shirt of over-lapping scales — scales made of shining twenty-dollar gold pieces. Upon her head was clapped the cook's blackest kettle. With one of the poles of the tarp tent out-thrust for lance, she was galloping full tilt into a galvanized-iron windmill. Between the stilt legs of the windmill, he saw the spectator-crowded grandstand of the rodeo toppling over. It crashed down upon his head like the temple roof upon blind Samson ——

He roused to awareness of knuckles rapping his forehead. The cracked voice of the old night wrangler muttered in his ear:

"Nubudy to home — nubudy to home! By the trombone of Gabriel — *Eugh!* Coming to life, is he? Roll out, kid. Your relief."

Tyrrel groaned, yawned, and sat up to voice his feelings.

"Alas, 'tis the nightingale and not the lark, Juliet! What d'you mean, walking your knuckles over my face, you hard-boiled screech owl?"

But the wrangler had wisely flitted. Tyrrel groped for his dew-drenched boots. The moon had set. He shivered in the chill of the blackness before dawn and smiled at the familiar nuzzling of Ante's lip on his shoulder. That cussed wrangler was not such a bad sort, after all. It meant a good deal to find your horse saddled for you.

Come to think, the fellow was lame little Jake. Pretty white of the old buckaroo! If he was a sample of the Kay Kay outfit, Big Mat would be the only killjoy of the trail. But those three Lincoln County punchers promised none too savory companionship.

At daybreak the herd rose and started to graze. As they scattered out, Tyrrel and his fellow guard headed them in the general direction of the day's drive. The other punchers soon came to drift the grazing steers gently along their way.

Neither Welsh nor Gerda knew much about the country in and near the Lazy S Bar range. It was all strange to them. They rode ahead to line out a trail towards Jack's Peak, oblique to the Jacarilla Mountains.

Tyrrel's fellow guard, the wolfish-faced Redeye, bolted his breakfast and went to help Cookie load the bed-rolls of the other punchers. Almost at once Pilar stepped daintily from the tent.

It was the first time that Tyrrel had been alone with the girl since his kiss in the dark. All the previous day she had ignored him. She halted with a little start as of shocked surprise.

"Oh! You here?"

Tyrrel smiled quizzically.

"What's the answer, *señorita?* Want a humble apology on my bended knee? Or are you after another salutation — but no, that wouldn't be right, little girl, even in fun."

Pilar stamped her tiny foot.

"*Santisima!* If you call me that again, I'll — I'll knife you!"

"My, my! She admires for to change her name to Carver! Well, then, let's make it 'Big Miss Chavez.' What, still pouting? Fact is, little — lady, you're a wild woman, but you're keen. You're an Elberta. Know what that is? Well, it has a tang and a high saccharine percentage, and it grows on a peach tree."

"Ah!" mocked the girl. "Is he not a grand *campeador* at throwing the bull!"

"No bull about it, child. Just the honest-to-goodness truth. You're a little peach, you're a little darling, you're a little ninety-nine per cent coquet. Leave me alone, and I'll not kiss you again. You're a nice girl, and I like you. But I saw another girl first. Understand?"

Pilar came close, her black eyes very bright and eager.

"That sounds like a dare, *Don* Ricardo."

"No, only a warning. Don't cry if you tempt me into playing and then find I'm not in earnest. That's all."

"Wait and see! If what I feel towards you is the real love — the grand passion! Ah, Dick, you are all *gringo*. You do not realize what it means to be Spanish! We women of the South, our blood is mingled fire, and honey, and wine!"

"Sorry, but I voted dry. The honey's all right, if offered with the milk of human kindness. As for the fire — you ought to know that children shouldn't play with fire."

The girl could not repress a giggle. It spoiled the effect of her dramatic pose. Yet she tried hard to strike a tragic note.

"We shall see whose fingers are burnt first!"

"Just so it's not those teenty-weenty paddies of yours, Miss Pilar."

The sincere good-will behind this banter checked her heroics.

"Oh . . . . if you really feel that way . . . . I like you almost enough for a friend."

Tyrrel nodded, well satisfied. As long as the girl understood how he felt, a little innocent flirting would amuse her and do no harm.

When the truck started, they cantered ahead to overtake the herd, with Pilar attuned to the more moderate key of coquetry tempered by friendliness.

They overtook the steers while they were still drift-grazing across country between creeks. By mid-morning the growing liveliness of the yearlings showed that they were fed up. The punchers went into quick action. Swing riders whooped up and down the sides of the herd, driving in the scattered animals until they strung into a white-spotted red ribbon half a mile long. A pair of pointers, the two foremost cowboys, rode on each side of the leaders as guides to the wavering column of cattle.

But not all the young steers submitted tamely to be driven. Though none were unwilling to shuffle along at a brisk gait, some jumped about like the enormous calves they were, tails up and heads down. They blatted and snorted and made frequent breaks to bolt from the herd. The worst of these rebels belonged to the bunch of seven wild steers.

Gailor, the day horse-wrangler, kept the "cavvy" close to the rear of the herd, for every rider had need to change his horse before noon. When Tyrrel shifted his saddle from Ante he had also to shift Pilar's. She had ridden as hard as any of the men and was keen to keep on the jump. Her only stipulation was that her fresh pony should be a gentled horse.

Gerda came racing back from the long ride ahead. During the return she had run Welsh's horse to a stand at the creek they had chosen for the noon halt. Without asking or waiting for assistance, she roped a fresh horse out of the cavvy with a short "hoolhan," and shifted her saddle and bridle from Lobo.

The new horse, though far from being an outlaw, was not well broken. He jumped and pitched with a violence that would have unseated any other than an expert. Gerda gave him spur and quirt like a broncho buster. He broke into a bucking run that soon settled down to a steady lope.

"Your cousin can ride," said Tyrrel.

"So can I, when I want to," replied Pilar. "First year at the Denver convent I was permitted to visit a friend who belonged to a girls' riding class. Stock Show week she fell ill. I slipped in under her name and coaxed the horse wrangler to saddle me a bad one."

"You could coax the canary out of the cat, *señorita*."

Pilar giggled at the remembrance of her escapade.

"I made excuse not to mount until in the middle of the ring. That darling outlaw started his fireworks right in the bunch of other girls. *Poder de Dios!* What fun! With

the silly flat saddle and short stirrups, it took me all my time to stick without pulling leather. How the women shrieked! You see, no one except the wrangler knew I could ride."

"My mistake just now," apologized Tyrrel. "Thought you asked for a gentled one."

"Of course. Why bump the bumps when it's not fun at all, but mere ordinary trail driving?"

"Why? That's easily answered, *señorita*—'For men must work, and women must weep; there's little to earn, and many to keep'—in this string of pig-headed yearlings. *Ye-ow!*"

With the yell, Tyrrel sprinted his horse to head off a particularly wayward steer.

But the attention of even the liveliest animals soon centered upon the water that they smelled ahead. Shortly after noon the herd reached and scattered out along the creek which Welsh and Gerda had chosen for the midday *siesta*. Nearly all the punchers dozed for the two hours that passed before the steers began to shift ground.

Twilight found the outfit a long seventeen miles from its starting point at dawn. The bed ground lay on the desolate prairie, miles out from the green ridges of the Jacarilla Mountains. The drive was well under way.

CHAPTER X

JACARILLA'S EAR MARK

NEXT day, after the noon stop, Pilar discovered something wrong with her saddle. But Gerda curtly vetoed the younger girl's request for Tyrrel to stay behind and make the repairs. She sent him on with the other punchers and remained with Welsh.

Neither she nor her partner was in any hurry to leave the big sycamore, on the bank of the almost dry creek. There was little the matter with Pilar's saddle, but it gave them excuse to loiter in the pleasant shade. No need to drag along in the dust of the herd. The steers were now driving well. Mid-afternoon would see all off Howbert's range.

When Welsh and the two girls rounded the low ridge that overlooked the north drift-fence of the Lazy S Bar, they first saw the tail of the drive going down over the next ridge. In the draw between, three men were waiting to replace the cut wires of the fence. Gerda was first to name them:

"Jacarilla, one of his riders, and Dick. The old rustler has come to make sure we're trailing only what we bought."

"It's not that," differed Welsh. "There's no doubt he sent men ahead of us to drift all his cattle clear of our trail. We haven't seen so much as one bunch—not even a stray steer or cow. No, it's his scheming with Tyrrel. They're laying out how to scatter the herd and rustle a bunch. With not a single head rebranded, we can't prove ownership, once they get them back on Jacarilla's range."

"Forget it, Mat. Dick is straight. He stayed behind merely to close the fence. Old Hack just happened to get

here ahead of us."

"Yes, it gave Dick an excuse to wait for me," confidently murmured Pilar.

But Gerda had not missed the cold glint in Welsh's blue eyes. She spoke curtly to her cousin.

"Lope ahead. Don't stop till you overtake Cookie. We'll be along after a bit."

Pilar smiled and raced down the slope. But she reined in her pony beside the group at the fence. She was chatting gaily with Howbert when Gerda and Welsh jogged to the foot of the ridge.

The two lower wires of the fence had been fastened up again. Howbert and his stolid Mexican companion sat with their ropes tied to the top strands, ready for the stretching. Pilar's pony and Ante were already on the far side of the fence. Dick stood ready to nail the staples.

The old cowman nodded to Gerda.

"Evening, ma'am. Reckoned I'd come out to see if Juan was 'tending proper to his fence riding. Dick tells me your outfit's all off my range, and nary a stray — not even them young renegades."

"No thanks to you, wishing that bunch on us," said Welsh.

Howbert's bushy brows came down over his eyes.

"I'll ask you folks all to hop the fence. You, too, son. You're a Kay Kay puncher now. Sorry to seem unhospital, Miss Gerdy, but I savvy the Welshes. If hell pops loose, I want it should be offen the Lazy S Bar. You and the little lady best jog on."

Welsh jumped his horse over the lower wires alongside Lobo. On the other side Gerda tried to crowd between him and the fence, but the roan scratched his leg on a barb and leaped clear. The glint in Welsh's eyes gave open warning that he was looking for trouble. Tyrrel caught up Pilar

and tossed her upon the pony.

"Hit out," he ordered. "Give him the spur."

Pilar swung the pony around a narrow circle and halted beside the prancing Lobo. Though frightened, she had no more intention of running away than had Gerda.

All this passed unheeded by Welsh. His cold glance never for an instant flickered away from the cadaverous face of his old enemy.

"Now," he rasped, "this Kay Kay deal is clean settled. Our outfit is off the Lazy S Bar. I'm free to have my say. First, I'll ask what sort of a rustling scheme you've cooked up with Tyrrel."

The old man looked at Gerda.

"You heard me tell him before, ma'am, not to use no such aprobrous term regarding me. Won't you pleasure us by adjourning with the little lady?"

"Don't worry about the girls," rejoined Welsh. "You're not going to muss me any, and they'll not cry very hard over the shooting-up of an ornery old brand-blotter."

Howbert's half-toothless mouth twisted in a grin.

"Take after your dad, *huh?* Well, I reckon you're looking for what's coming to you. Only it's just what you say. I ain't going to muss you up much. I'll just put the Lazy S Bar notch where it belongs — in your left ear."

Welsh's hand had been hovering near his hip. He jerked the big automatic pistol from its holster. Howbert drew and fired his old Colts with lightning swiftness. The pistol whirled down out of Welsh's hand. Before it struck the dust, Howbert fired again. Welsh clapped his hand to his left ear. His face flamed with rage and shame.

"You son of a——"

The up-tilting muzzle of the Colts cut short the curse.

"That's it, sonny. You're getting wised," jeered the old gunman. "If you don't want t'other ear clipped clean off,

just keep your ugly lip sewed up tight. You can thank your lucky stars they's ladies present, else I'd clip it anyhow, and hair brand you, to boot. Now get to hell outer here."

Fortunately for Welsh, he knew better than to hesitate even for a moment. He whirled his horse and loped away.

Tyrrel at once picked up the big pistol and handed it to Gerda. For the first time since she had known him his eyes were grave, though his lips smiled.

"I suppose this ends it, Miss Keith. If it does — if I'm no longer a Kay Kay man, just have Cookie drop my bed-roll off the truck."

Gerda looked him up and down with her ever-ready scorn.

"Want to quit, do you? Afraid Mat will take it out on you?"

"Well, I'm not so sure. Maybe, if I tried real hard, I might manage to get up nerve enough to chance his ire. Only thing, if you believe, as he does, that Mr. Howbert and I are up to any shady deal ——"

"You were hired for this drive. I take it you're not a quitter."

Tyrrel shook hands with Howbert, nodded to the stolid Mexican, and swung upon Ante. The cowman lifted an embarrassed glance to the girls.

"Mighty sorry I had to smoke up Big Mat 'fore you ladies. I done my dam-durndest to dodge busting loose."

"Don't mention it," said Gerda. She gave the old man one of her rare smiles. "This pistol and your second shot — they are double proofs. I owe a partner to your forbearance. You're the quickest man on the draw I ever saw shoot."

"Mat ain't no slouch. But his dad was real quick. Just luck I got One-Gun both times. Your own dad wasn't much with a six-shooter. He sure was all there, though, with a Winchester. Once sided him 'gainst a bunch of Apache renegades."

"You did?" cried Gerda, her eyes glowing.

"Yeppe. Mentioned it just so's you know I ain't got nothing 'gainst the Kay Kay, no matter what Big Mat says."

"In that case, Mr. Howbert, it's only between you two. The Kay Kay will do its best to keep on the fence."

"'Bliged!"

With a nod to Pilar and Tyrrel, the old man picked up his fence-rider's hammer and started to drive staples.

From the top of the ridge Pilar waved down to him. But he was still fastening the fence wires and failed to see her.

As the three neared the rear of the herd, Welsh dropped back to meet them. The notch in his ear had been covered with surgeon's plaster. He looked hard at Tyrrel.

"I've explained to the boys that I got hurt while the fence wire was being stretched."

"That's not stretching the facts very much, Mat," replied Gerda. "We'll all remember it that way."

She looked at Tyrrel and Pilar. Tyrrel smiled.

"Yes, ma'am. I never contradict a lady."

CHAPTER XI

QUERIDO

THE remainder of the day's trailing swung the herd close to the spurs of Jack's Peak. From there the course veered around to the north side of the peak and up-creek.

By the time the last bed ground below Gallinas was reached the herd was very well trail-broken. Only the bunch of wild steers remained fractious. Each morning Gerda had ridden ahead with Welsh, to line out the day's drive and settle for passage across the ranges where payment was required.

After supper in the camp near Gallinas, Welsh made a curt talk to the punchers.

"Morning'll bring us to our jumping-off place — four miles drift-grazing to our last water. From there we strike west across the railroad, south of the Sierra Gallinas, and head for the Chupadera Mesa. First water is down the far side of the mesa on the Kay Kay range. It's going to be a mean drive. I figure it between fifty and sixty miles — all dry."

Old Jake grunted his contempt.

"*Huh!* Fifty-sixty — mighty small bacon. When I was a kid, used to make the big drive to the Pecos on the old Texas trail — ninety miles — *ninety*, and dry as bone!"

"But you drove Texas longhorns," said Tyrrel — "rangy, long-legged cattle. These low-set Her'fords haven't the stride."

Gerda cut in ahead of Welsh.

"I've laid it all out. We'll night-trail."

"Sorry to differ," said Welsh. "That would be a mistake. The herd will do better if bedded down as usual. Too

much risk, night driving."

"Not if you sell that wild bunch or turn them adrift," suggested Tyrrel.

Welsh seized the opportunity for one of his frequent gibes.

"This isn't dairy business, Colorow. When we want advice from farmers, we'll ask for it."

"I'm asking now," said Gerda. "What is it about that bunch, Dick?"

"Getting more restless every night. Last time we had to hog-tie the lot. They were stirring up the whole herd."

"You didn't tell me about it," rasped Welsh.

"Thought I was hired to do the work of a puncher."

"He's got you there, Mat!" Gerda stopped to chuckle. "The drinks are on him, Dick. Come into Gallinas with us tomorrow. I'll make him set up the pop."

"But about that wild bunch, Miss Keith?"

The gray-green eyes glinted.

"You're as pertinacious as Mat! They'll need no tying after tonight. End of next drive, they'll be glad to lie down and stay down."

In the morning Welsh and Gerda for once lingered over breakfast with Pilar, while the herd grazed off on the extra slow drift to the last water.

Tyrrel helped the fat cook load up the truck, which was to follow the riders into Gallinas for supplies. The work held him back after the others were ready to start. Gerda was quick to divine Pilar's reason for fussing with her cinch. She frowned, cast an impatient look at Tyrrel, and started off with the well-pleased Welsh.

On the instant Tyrrel headed for Ante. But Pilar called to him in a half whisper:

"If you wish, *Don* Ricardo, you may tie on my mask for me."

She had not used the face protector for the last two days,

yet Tyrrel was not surprised. The one thing certain about her seemed to be that she could be counted upon to do the unexpected. As he took the mask he saw Gerda look around. He bent close over the shoulder of her cousin.

Pilar smiled up at him sweetly and took off her dashing Gainsborough sombrero. Its high crown had barely allowed room for the high Spanish coiffure of her raven-black hair, topped with a Spanish comb of gold filigree. The mass of hair gave out a faint odor of orange blossoms.

The delicious scent was more heady than a drink of mescal. Tyrrel felt an almost irresistible impulse to kiss the nape of the girl's creamy, round neck. Yet he tied the strings of the mask with steady fingers.

"Never saw two girls more unlike than you and Miss Keith, *niña*," he remarked. "No one would take you to be cousins."

"We're not!" The girl spoke with sharp emphasis. "She — and her brother — they're not really first cousins to me. In blood they do not fully come within the forbidden degrees of the Church. My mother was only their hálf-aunt. Granddad Keith — old Kenneth Keith — had two wives."

"Two? Ah, lucky man — doubly blessed! One to mend his socks, and t'other to mend his ways."

"Don't be silly." The black eyes peeped over the rim of the mask in a glance of tender enticement. "He took them in a series. My *madre* was the daughter of his second wife."

"Who was a daughter of Lilith — judging by present results," bantered Tyrrel. "Or are all said results due to that Spanish blood of honey, fire and wine?"

One little boot came down with a thud.

"Oh, you *bobo* iceman! I could get more action out of a wooden Injin!"

"Action, you say?" Tyrrel made a long-armed sweep that tossed her up bodily into the saddle. "How's that, *mia*

amega?"

"I'm not your *amega!* We're not friends at all. How dare you touch me?"

Tyrrel swung onto Ante and started off beside the girl, his face long and a twinkle in his ruddy brown eyes.

"My apologies, Miss Chavez! Back on the Lazy S Bar you said you liked me almost enough for a friend. Since then we've jogged down Life's mysterious stream, cooing like two turtles on a log — I mean, bough. Have I mistaken a falcon for a dove?"

He gazed pensively up at the hawks that dotted the morning sky.

"The fierce falcon hovering to swoop . . . . and me, the poor helpless little prairie-doglet shivering in the dust!"

"Prairie rattler, you mean! Only you're still more cold-blooded — like a fish — or a lobster!"

Tyrrel's mouth and eyes rounded in O's of surprised admiration.

"Perfect metaphor — perfect! They say lobsters are green until scalded — all the same as this one. See me blush scarlet. Worst of it is, lobster is apt to disagree with you."

Pilar's petulance could not resist this good-humored nonsense.

"Oh, Dick! I'm a cat. But if only you realized! It's — it's so poky. You know how wild Mat is over Gerda. He'll not even look sideways at me. Cookie's too fat, and Jake and Gailor too old. The other punchers — that brute Butch, and coyote Redeye and snaky Slim — they're simply horrid. That leaves only you."

"For fun, then," agreed Tyrrel. "Not for keeps, though, remember. You can fire when you're ready, Gridley."

"*Mil gracias, campeador mio! Ah, querido, dulcisimo, carisimo!*"

"*Encore — encore!* Sounds like Geraldine in *Carmen* when

she hits into *fortissimo,*" applauded Tyrrel. "You have a peachy voice when you sugar it, child — I mean, Elberta."

Pilar laughed outright, and gave up her futile coquetry. She pulled off her mask, to chat and joke in their chummy offhand manner of the last few days. But until they reached Gallinas she contrived to keep their horses lagging out of earshot of Gerda and Welsh.

As the four cantered into the little town on the railroad, a man in a big Mexican sombrero stepped out from under the arcade of an adobe house, almost within arm's-reach of Gerda. Pilar's shriek of delight brought all the party to a sudden halt. Under the uptilting brim of the sombrero Tyrrel made out the genial mouth and shell-rimmed spectacles of Donald Keith.

Though first to recognize him, Pilar did not hasten to dismount. Gerda had flung her reins over Lobo's head and jumped off, all in the same second. She gripped her brother's hand and hastened to push him back into the cool shade of the arcade.

Welsh followed and shook the hand of his partner no less heartily.

"Well, well, old man! Where'd you drop from?" he asked.

"Drove the car home and came back around by rail," replied Keith. "Bought a keg of sour pickles and half a case of lemons to cut the alkali for you. Rather thought you'd show up some time today. *Buenos dias, niña!* You look fit as a fiddle and two shades more Spanish. My eye, what's that dazzle on Lobo, Gerd? You bought the contest saddle!"

"Tried to, Donnie. But Dick would not sell. I found it cinched on Lobo, morning we started."

Keith shot a shrewd glance at Tyrrel's grave face.

"I see, young man. Made a killing on your deal, eh?"

Pilar had not yet dismounted. She sat staring down into

the shaded arcade, her pretty lips tense, her black eyes somber.

"You've no call to sneer at Dick, Don *Señor,*" she said. "He received little enough for giving the Kay Kay a grand bargain. Wait till you hear about the killing that Mat tried to make."

"What's that? Another deal?"

"Return bill on an old one of Mat's," explained Gerda. "Our feeders bear the Lazy S Bar."

"Old Hack How's brand!"

"Yes, and we found them at home with Jacarilla. Give the devil his due. The old rustler acted white. Joke is, we all rubbed stirrups with him at the rodeo and didn't know it. He was that hoary-headed patriarch who braced Dick up after the riding. Same who cashed in on the neat bet with Mat. After closing the deal, we had a last meeting with him as we left his range."

Keith peered inquiringly at Welsh. The third partner of the Kay Kay was still wearing surgeon's plaster on his left ear. The sudden reddening of the ear made the white patch stand out by contrast. In the constrained silence, Pilar's sweet half whisper to Tyrrel was heard by all.

"I wait for you to help me down, Ricardo *querido.*"

Strange to say, the girl had not yet explained to Tyrrel the meaning of the Spanish term for "beloved." But the startled, resentful looks of Gerda and her brother told him that *querido* had more than an indifferent significance. He flushed as the girl slipped down into his arms, one little gloved hand half clasping his neck.

Welsh scowled. Keith took off his hat to wipe his bald head with an unsteady hand. His sister gripped the younger girl's shoulder and shook her as if she were a naughty infant.

"For shame! You romantic little fool! Can't you remember you're half Keith in blood, if not in nature? Try

to forget the greaser taint ——"

Pilar's hand darted to her bosom. It snatched out a tiny old crucifix-handled dagger. No less swiftly, Gerda's hand clutched the plump little wrist.

"You wildcat kitten! Scratch, would you? Put it back, or I'll spank you, right here and now."

The down-forced little hand replaced the stiletto in its hidden sheath. With a disdainful smile, Gerda released her iron grip. Pilar stood very still, the pupils of her eyes dilating with horror.

"*Ave, Maria, salvar nos!* What would I have done? You drive me frantic! To say such things — when you know my *padre* came of the oldest families — of purest Castilian descent! If you continue to mock at him and me, I will kill myself!"

"Cut the melodrama, you silly little —" Over the younger girl's head Gerda's lifting glance met the intent gaze of Tyrrel. She hesitated, looked down again at her overwrought cousin, and burst into irritable apology:

"You know I was born with my temper, *niña*, just as you were with your coquetry. If only you'd quit riling me! I know you're not a bad girl, *chiquita*. It's only that you like to play the baby vamp. You don't realize how it looks to others."

"You — you are angry because Dick ——"

"Not at all. It's yourself, *niña*. As for your *padre*, I've been wrong all along. I can't help being dad's daughter. Sheep and all things Mex go against my grain. I hate both — like him. Just the same, I own up now that your *padre* was not a greaser. He was a gentleman and a white man. You have a right to be proud of *all* your blood."

Tears gushed into Pilar's eyes. In a twinkling Keith had hold of her hand and was dusting the back of her scarlet blouse with fatherly thumps. She hid her face against his

shirt front and wept while the others looked on in abashed silence. She was so young and small — so like a grieved little child. Even Welsh's harsh face softened with concern.

Under Keith's petting, the girl quickly cried herself out. She stifled her sobs and drew back to smile up into the face of her guardian, her eyes still glistening with tears.

"Ah, Don *Señor!* Whatever would I do without my good old *dueño?*"

Her little hands thrust up to grasp the fringe of sandy hair above each of his ears. She drew his head down and pressed a fervent kiss upon its shiny white top. The white suddenly went pink. He jerked back out of the girl's grasp and, under pretext of adjusting his spectacles, put up both hands to hide his flushed face.

Pilar shrank aside, cut to the quick by his brusque repulsion. But he was too intent upon covering his own hurt and confusion to heed hers. He spoke to his sister.

"You — those feeders — came up to representation, did they?"

"All prime year-and-a-half calves, Donnie, and we've brought them through so far all right."

"But she insists on night-driving the dry trail," said Welsh. "Back me up, Don. Day trailing will be safer."

"We might drive the first night, Mat. Then go by results."

Pilar forgot her pique to flash a glance at her guardian's boots, overalls and leather vest.

"Oh! You've come to trail along with us!"

"If Tyrrel will oblige me by fetching my horse from the corral. The supplies are here."

As Tyrrel rode off, both Lobo and Pilar's horse swung around, eager to follow him.

"Look there. Do you wonder I'm so fond of Dick?" murmured the girl. "Every horse he handles wants to tag

him about, even that locoed devil of Gerda's."

Keith forced a chuckle that lacked his usual geniality.

"A born gentler, eh? Let us hope he doesn't put the same com'ither on you girls."

"With you along, Don, we can give one of the punchers his time," Welsh hastened to put in a stroke. "Why not fire this fellow!"

"Why him in particular?" asked Gerda.

She looked at Welsh with a smile that seemed to carry a dare. His thin lips tightened.

"Happens, I don't like the cut of his ears."

Involuntarily the glances of Keith and the girls flicked towards the patch on the speaker's left ear. He flushed a deep beet red. With mingled generosity and strategy, Gerda diverted attention from the subject of ears with a flank attack.

"Trouble with you, Mat, you can't forget he out-roped and out-rode you. Well, I hired the boy. He's top-hand of this drive, and he sticks. Savvy?"

"You have no need to use that tone, Gerda," protested her brother. "Mat is not a hand. He's one of the heads ——"

"But I'm top-head for this drive, Donnie, and you both know it. This is my deal. I started it. I'm going to boss till the steers are on our range."

Both men figuratively threw up their hands. They knew the temper of their lady partner.

By the time Tyrrel returned with the led-horse, the truck was chugging into town. Lemons, pickles and all the other supplies were loaded in, along with Keith's bed-roll. Followed by the truck, the five riders headed aslant country, toward the herd's last watering place.

At the start Tyrrel quietly fell in behind the others. But Pilar immediately stopped her horse until Ante came up alongside. After a short talk with his partners about business,

Keith dropped back to ask Pilar how she had enjoyed the trip.

Again Tyrrel fell to the rear. He was only a puncher hired for the drive. "Two's company, and three's a crowd." As he murmured the old saying, Gerda deliberately swung around to side him.

"Tell me something pleasant," she ordered. "Mat is set against night-trailing, and hasn't sense enough to chop off. He's a cowman right, but stubborn as a — as I am. Only, with me, it's proper firm-mindedness."

"Want my opinion?" asked Tyrrel.

"Yes."

"Well, maybe you'll agree with me in principle, if not in practice. Women should boss indoors, and men outdoors."

"Old stuff, Dick, that 'hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.' Excuse *me*. I'm an outdoors woman."

Tyrrel studied with quiet appraisal her strong, graceful figure, her rich color and firm, finely moulded features, all radiant with life and energy.

"You are more than an outdoors woman, Miss Keith," he said. "You are a superbly beautiful girl."

"Flattery's a poor compliment, cowboy."

"You asked me to say something pleasant. It's one case where I can do so, yet tell the truth."

"Is this the way you've turned Pilar's silly little head?"

"*Sabe Dios*. I'm a big, bold, bad man. How can I help being adored by all the ladies?"

Gerda did not laugh. She appraised him in turn, staring intently at his solemn face and humorous eyes.

"What I want to know, Dick, is how you do your gentling. I saw Lobo nuzzle you, yesterday. He'd bite a piece out of me 'most any time, if I'd let him."

The twinkle left Tyrrel's eyes. He shook his head perplexedly.

"Search me! I never scratch a horse unless I have to. Maybe they sense that. You ought to know. I've heard that women are like horses."

This time Gerda frowned.

"Is that so? Well, don't forget that some horses are outlaws."

"Yessum. I know. Hear me brag how I rode Still Hell. I might do it again, but I'd rather not have to."

The girl's frown deepened. Had this remark any connection with his opinion on bosses?

Tyrrel smiled and swayed to the swerve of Ante around a prickly pear cactus. He jerked his gloved thumb at the big needle-bristling leaf-pads.

"Don't you agree it's a mistake making pincushions inside out?"

Gerda's reply was to jab her spurs into Lobo. Outraged, yet held from bolting by her grip on the cruel Spanish bit, the thoroughbred went plunging and side-jumping past Keith and Pilar. His rider pulled him down to a walk alongside the morose-eyed Welsh.

CHAPTER XII

IN BAD

DURING the midday *siesta* Donald Keith talked with lame Jake about the ways of the old Texas trails. He was neither imperious, like his sister, nor harsh, like Welsh. With genial patience he listened to the old wrangler's garrulous history of notable drives and to his patronizing advice.

As a result, the senior partner of the Kay Kay learned several facts that confirmed him in his backing of Gerda. He cited them to Welsh, winding up with what he considered the most important.

"It will not be a blind drive, Mat. We'll have a three-quarter moon. That meets your argument that the herd may get scattered in the dark."

"Moon nothing — up among the pinons and cedars on the Chupadera," muttered Welsh, still tight-jawed on his opposition.

"We don't have to jump that gully till we come to it," said Gerda. "Cinch up. There go the bunch of wild ones. All tanked up, are you, Cookie?"

"Full to the bung and slopping over, Miss Gerdy — barrels, canteens, kettles — everything with a cork or cover. I ain't taking no chances. Got caught dry, once, down in Death Valley. Would've cashed in, only it was so blasted hot it melted my hydrycarbon fats — burnt up the carbon fat and left me the hydry-water. Leastways that's how them U. S. science sharps diagnosed my survival."

Tyrrel, who had helped in the filling of the tanks, dropped his empty buckets with a clatter.

"Where's my notebook? I've looked into irrigation, but never saw mention of that source of water supply."

"Pity it won't work in the Tabru country," said Gerda. "Can't you see our feeders, Donnie, dewlap-deep in that mesquite grass!"

"Sorry, but I can't see them in any grass, next month, if the rains are late," replied her brother.

It was his first and last allusion to his original stand against the deal. He checked Pilar's movement towards Tyrrel with a rather curt order for her to wait while he fetched her pony. She pouted but obeyed.

By now the herd had all risen and started to follow the westward drift of their leaders, the seven wild steers. Soon all were strung out in the usual half-mile column. The restless leaders quickened their shuffle to a brisk trail gait. Herd and riders and following cavvy and chuck-truck drew clear from the big cottonwoods of the last water and wound away over the dreary, close-grazed range.

The vivid live green of the waterside growths soon drifted to the rear. To the northwest the cedar-clad spurs of the Sierra Gallinas stood out against the turquoise sky. Far ahead the heat-wavering horizon showed a blurred dark line that might have been either a mirage or the pine-darkened top of the Chupadera Mesa.

All else was semi-desert — a vast dry plain, scattered over with yuccas and prickly pears, greasewood and staghorn cactus. Whether to regard it as an abomination of desolation or a masterpiece of wondrous tints and heavenly light, all depended upon the digestion and mood of the beholder.

Tyrrel's eye was more that of an impressionist than of a realist. He knew that the cactus thorns were needle-sharp and charged with poison, but he saw only the fierce beauty of their clusterings. He knew that the landscape was arid range that had been badly overstocked. But he sensed the

symphony of tawns and duns and grays, transmuted by the down-pourings of dry light into an ethereal expanse of soft pure color, without weight or substance — almost without form.

The long column of rider-flanked steers clattered across the steel strings of the railroad and shuffled on westward at a half trot. The foremost animals stood out against the barren ground, clear red and white under the intense blue of the sky. Behind them rose a haze from the dust stirred up by the scuffling hoofs. Still farther back the dust thickened into a gray cloud that hung over and veiled all the rear of the herd.

Hour after hour the fierce sun burned its way down the cloudless western sky. And hour after hour herd and riders, cavvy and chuck-truck, trailed westward across the semi-desert. The fiery disc of molten steel sagged low upon the black line of the horizon. All the dusty column drove onwards, straight into the crimsoning dazzle of the sunset.

The red glare in the west died out. But before the short twilight faded, the moon slipped up over the desolate eastern plains, blotched and distorted and yellow as a pumpkin. Tyrrel remarked that it was like a mule-kicked full-cream cheese rubbed with phosphorus.

Some of the steers began to drag. Even the foremost slackened their pace. It was the usual hour for bedding down. But the cowboy pointers did not stop the leaders. They rode steadily onwards. Behind them, all the way back along the column, the swing riders urged the lagging herd into renewed briskness.

Cookie had driven ahead. As the drive neared his glowing little fire of cow chips, the punchers took turns racing to bolt their supper of coffee, ham and hot bread. Gerda and Keith came last with Pilar. Both urged their cousin to snuggle in among the bed-rolls on the truck and get a good

night's sleep. But she was no less determined than Gerda to take part in the night drive.

Long before midnight the girl regretted her refusal of the bed. After the first novelty of riding in the moonlight had worn off, the going became very monotonous. The weird black shadows soon lost their interest, and the chill of the night air made her shiver. Keith and Tyrrel were riding as pointers. Gerda opposed her joining them, yet gave her no chance to share Welsh's talk.

Too proud to take to the truck, Pilar trailed behind in the dust. The endless procession of cactus and yuccas drifting past in the moonlight, threw her into a hypnotic doze. There was no excitement to rouse her. Hour after hour, the half-mile column of steers shuffled along over the arid high plains, flanked by the silent riders.

Daybreak found the outfit on range not so badly overgrazed as back near Gallinas. The herd was allowed to scatter and graze while the riders gathered for breakfast. The rays of the rising sun brought out clearly the miniature bristle of pines on the distant western horizon.

"The Chupadera," said Gerda. "We'll make it by sundown."

"Then what?" demanded Welsh.

She smiled at her young cousin.

"A chance, Mat, for us all to bed down and catch up on our beauty sleep. You don't suppose I've been fool enough to plan on trailing the herd through the cedars at night. Own up, though. We were wise to drive this first night."

"We happened to have luck," said Welsh.

The good luck continued throughout that day. Made thirsty by the night drive, the herd grazed less than usual and started off briskly on the way to their customary watering. At the noon halt, finding no water, they remained restless during the two-hour *siesta* through the heat of midday.

In the afternoon drive the drags, or weaker animals, had to be urged to keep up with the herd. But sunset brought all over the outlying ridges to the foot of the somber mesa. The herd was bedded down midway across the sandy valley that extended northwards, like a great trough, between the mesa and the outer ridges.

Had there been water, the country would have made a perfect range. The brown, sun-cured hay of grama grass stood knee-high over all the valley bottom and ridge slopes. But the steers lay down in the midst of the abundant forage, too thirsty to munch the rich but dry stalks. As Gerda had predicted, after the night and day drive even the bunch of renegades were quite willing to rest.

No less weary, all the outfit except Jake and the first relief of the night guard made ready to roll into their blankets immediately after supper. Keith checked them with one of his quiet, unassertive orders:

"Hold on, boys. I'll ask everyone to fill his canteen. Cookie says the night tank is empty. There's enough water left in the other to go around, and a little over. So don't run dry, but be sparing."

Butch muttered something about a willingness to swap all his share of water for a quart of bootleg. As he waddled off to his bed-roll with the wolfish Redeye, Keith spoke in an undertone to Welsh.

"How did you happen to draw those buckaroos, Mat — and the one called Slim? Three of a kind!"

"Well, three of a kind beats two pairs," replied Welsh. "The boys might be worse — and their dads were all on the right side during the Lincoln County war. Good thing I picked them up. Their being along is probably what has headed off Hack How from trying to put over the funny business he had all cooked up with that fellow Tyrrel."

"Tyrrel? How you must love the boy! You slam him

every time he is mentioned."

"What else can you expect, Donnie?" said Gerda. "Dick put it all over Mat at the rodeo."

"Not all," denied Welsh. "I beat him in the bulldogging. Before I get through, I'll bulldog *him*."

Gerda smiled provokingly.

"You will if you can. Go to it. May the best man win."

"I'll win you!" promised Welsh, his jaw like a steel vise.

She laughed and went to join Pilar in the little tent.

Tyrrel heard nothing of this. He already lay deep in dreamless slumber. He was on the third relief, and wished to get his full share of sleep before being called by old Jake.

When he closed his eyes the stars were beginning to glint palely in the darkening blue of the cloudless sky. Hours later he roused out of heavy slumber to sudden consciousness. In his ears still echoed a deep low rumble. He peered around. North, south, east, overhead — the sky was frosted with stars. But westward, above the mesa, hung a black pall.

The border of the clouds was sweeping swiftly forward, blanketing the stars. Down aslant the blackness stabbed a zigzag of blue-white fire. Again Tyrrel's ears reverberated with the heavy rumble of distant thunder. A night storm!

Tyrrel sprang up. He was half way to the cavvy before Welsh's bull voice began to blare orders for all riders to turn out. As Ante came to the call of his master, Tyrrel became aware of Gerda at his elbow.

"Can you make out my roan?" she asked.

"No need your riding, Miss Gerda. We men can handle the herd. Better go back and get a good sleep."

"I'm not here to argue. That locoed roan is apt to go clean off his head in a thunderstorm."

Her rope was already in Tyrrel's hand. He snaked the thoroughbred out of the midst of the cavvy.

"Thanks. I can manage now," said Gerda. "Go on.

You'll be needed."

A blinding flash, followed in two seconds by a booming roll of thunder, gave emphasis to the statement. Rapidly as Tyrrel cinched on his saddle and rode to the bedding ground, he joined the pair of night guards none too soon. The storm was swooping down from the summit of the mesa.

Startled by the thunder and lightning, the herd had begun to heave up. Tyrrel was just in time to head off a rush of steers led by the seven troublesome renegades. They whirled and ran straight back through the midst of the herd, gathering scores of recruits to their panic. Butch and Slim barely succeeded in stopping them at the far side. They wheeled about again and dashed towards Tyrrel, this time followed by hundreds of frightened animals.

Still more swiftly, the storm swirled down into the valley, its blackness meshed with a dazzling network of lightning flashes. The peals of thunder thickened into a continuous crashing din. Thunderbolts began to strike the iron-veined limestone crests of the nearby ridge spurs.

Barely in time, Welsh and Gerda and Redeye came racing to help Tyrrel check the starting stampede. The girl's cry rang clear through the thunder, above the bellowing of the herd ——

"To the left! Mill them! Mill them to the left!"

All rode aslant at the leaders of the rush. They crowded up alongside the panic-stricken beasts, yelling and waving slickers. The steers shied off to the left. They kept veering as the riders raced on with them.

The remaining men of the outfit, including even the fat cook, arrived at a gallop and strung in behind. Instead of bolting off in a straight line, the van of the herd kept circling, away from the riders. The following mob of maddened beasts veered around after their leaders.

Rain began to slash down out of the lightning-ripped pall,

every drop a liquid bullet of ice water. The air was surcharged with electricity. All around, static burst out in weird flare and crackle — on the horns of the cattle, on the ears of the horses, on the hat peaks of the riders, on their waving slickers. But the circle of the turning herd leaders had been narrowed. It curved in still more. The whole herd merged into a solid milling mass.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR LIFE — FOR LOVE

FOR a time Tyrrel felt sure the herd was safe. Spaced at equal distances from each other, the riders raced round and round the milling beasts, heading back all that attempted to bolt from the mass, and keeping the outer ones deluded with the belief that they were running away.

In any storm that Tyrrel had ever before experienced, the herd could have been held. But never had he known such a terrific electrical outburst. The static charge bristled his hair and tingled his nerves like prickling needles; his ears were deafened by the crashing shocks of thunder; the continuous flare of the lightning dazzled and half-blinded him.

Like Gerda and all the others, he gave no heed to the icy drench of the hard-driven rain. Slickers were of more service flaunted and waved in the wild eyes of the frantic steers. Three times he galloped Ante around the herd, yelling at the top of his lungs.

A few yards ahead of him raced Gerda. Not one of all the men showed more skill or courage than the girl who sat so firmly in her silver saddle on the fear-maddened thoroughbred. The same distance behind Tyrrel came Welsh, trying his best to out-bellow steers and thunder alike. Keith and the three Lincoln County punchers, the old horse wranglers and Cookie completed the swiftly revolving ring of horses and men.

For the full first three times of circling, the riders held the terror-stricken mob of steers. Given fair chance, they might have continued to hold the herd safe through all the furious uproar of the storm. But as Tyrrel swirled into the

beginning of his fourth circle a bolt of blinding white flame crashed down into the midst of the steers near him. The flare and detonation were so frightful that he reeled in his saddle.

Sight was the first sense to return to him. Close on his left he saw the herd surging, wave-like, away from the three steers that had been struck down by the thunderbolt. Not even a hundred riders could have held back the now absolutely frenzied beasts. Tyrrel caught sight of Gerda sprinting towards the camp.

The rush of the stampede had already closed about Ante. Tyrrel's spurs sent the gray plunging ahead. He burst clear of the wild mob. Tyrrel instantly veered him to the left, to angle across the face of the stampede. In desperate effort to turn the leaders, he whipped out his pistol and began to fire. One of that troublesome bunch of renegades dropped — another — a third . . . . three down in six shots!

Something seared across Tyrrel's cheek like a red-hot branding-iron. Over his shoulder he glimpsed the out-thrust pistol of Welsh. The man was shooting at him! He ducked down in his saddle and swerved Ante to run straight ahead of the stampede.

A new impulse jabbed his spurs again hard into Ante's flanks. The truck stood tail-on to the stampede. It would divide the torrent of steers like a rock in mid-stream. But what if Pilar had not left the shelter of the little tent?

Through the rain-blurred lightning glare he dashed at top speed. A figure swirled across, close in front of Ante's big nose — Gerda on the maddened, sideward leaping Lobo. The thoroughbred was clear out of control, as frantic as the steers. Tyrrel caught a glimpse of the girl's fear-distorted face. Her dread was not for herself. Her lips parted to scream to him. As Lobo whirled her away, he heard, or thought he heard, the words of her cry:

"Pilar! Save——"

What better proof of her high spirit could he have asked! Even at that moment of terror, in danger of death from thunderbolts or the trampling hoofs of the herd, she had proved her gameness. Her one thought had been for the safety of her cousin—the girl she did not like.

Hardly had the realization flashed upon Tyrrel, when the tent appeared only a few feet ahead. He leaped from his saddle with a flying dismount, and was beside the tent while Ante still slithered on the drenched grass. No time to unlace lashings. He ripped up the whole front of the tent.

Wakened by the storm, Pilar had turned out, only to creep back and huddle among her blankets. With one sweep of his long arms, Tyrrel wrapped his slicker around the trembling girl and flung her across his shoulder. He whirled to mount. The foremost steers of the stampede were almost upon him—frantic-running, wild-eyed, bellowing maniacs, backed by the living avalanche of their fellows.

The slightest slip or falter would have meant certain death. Even with the utmost of Tyrrel's quickness, it was a matter of split seconds. As he jumped into the saddle, Ante leaped—with the snout of the nearest steer hard-pressed against his rat tail.

Had the steers been Texas longhorns, horse and rider and girl must have been run down and trampled under the thousands of hoofs. The short-legged Herefords were hard enough to escape. The handicap of his standing start gave Ante all he could do to outleap the red torrent.

But half a dozen jumps got the big gray under full way. He forged out ahead of the frantic steers. Tyrrel swallowed his heart and remembered Pilar. The girl's arms were locked about his neck in a terrified clutch. He gave Ante his head, eased his convulsive grasp of Pilar's soft little body, and drew loose her arms from his neck.

"Let go," he shouted above the uproar of the storm and the bellowing of the frenzied steers. "It's all right now. Trust Ante."

But over his shoulder the lightning glare showed the girl the close-following hundreds of maddened beasts. Her arms again clutched his neck. She cowered down with her face tight against his rain-drenched breast. Panic is beyond all reason. Tyrrel turned his attention to their surroundings.

They were running in a northerly direction, between the mesa and the outlying ridges. The valley had narrowed. Close on the right and left, thunderbolts were striking the iron-veined rocks. The storm was still at its height. Glancing back, Tyrrel saw that the stampede had spread out in a wide flood.

"We'd better not try to side-step. Might get jammed against a hill spur," he spoke into the terror-deafened little ear of Pilar. "Best to jog on. That'll land us where we can do the most good when those wild and woolly ones run themselves to a stand. Rest of the outfit will follow."

Through the veiling sheet of rain he saw a wash close ahead. He barely had time to brace himself for Ante's leap down the four-foot drop-off. They climbed the far bank of the broad, shallow arroyo as the stampede poured in after them.

For an hour or more the storm raged with little lessening of its fury, driving the herd on and on in panic-stricken frenzy. Fortunately for Tyrrel and Pilar, no less than for the terror-maddened beasts, no deep arroyo crossed the course of their flight.

At last the violence of the storm began to abate. The crackling and flaring of static already had ceased. Moments of utter blackness began to blot out ridges and valley bottom between the white glare of the lightning flashes. At more and more frequent intervals the thunder lulled from its

crashing shocks. The rain thinned into a drizzle. The flight had reached the north border of the storm. Yet still the herd galloped on in its frantic stampede.

For a time the occasional flashes lighted the country ahead for Tyrrel. Then, at last, even the glimmer of sheet lightning ceased. He had to trust to luck and the instinct of Ante. They kept on into the black night; for behind them thudded all those thousands of hoofs. The drizzle ended, but the sky remained overcast. Neither moon nor stars glimmered through the clouds to lessen the inky darkness.

Another hour at least of blind riding passed before Tyrrel's anxious ear caught a lull in the uproar of the herd. The steers had ceased to bellow. A few were bawling. Tired out by their long run and the deep sand of the bottom land, many had begun to lag behind. Even the strong ones in the lead were slackening from frantic run into shambling trot. Longhorns probably would have run on until morning. The heavy-set, short-legged Herefords had already spent themselves. A little more, and even the leaders came to a stand. The stampede was ended.

Tyrrel pulled in the now jogging Ante to a walk and turned to the left. Before long they struck rising ground — a ridge slope. Pilar was shivering, as much from the reaction after her fright as from the chill of the cold rain that had found more than one opening in Tyrrel's slicker.

"Only a short while now, little girl," Tyrrel sought to cheer her. "We'll soon have a blaze."

He felt the scour of juniper tips against his chaps. Here was possible firewood. He swung out of his saddle. Pilar could not stand without support. A touch of his bared fingers showed him that the hillside was dry. Not a drop of rain had fallen here. He eased the girl to the ground and felt around for wood.

In a few moments he had a fire of juniper sticks blazing

merrily. Pilar crept close alongside the flames to toast her absurdly small stockinged feet. Miles away, back at the camp, her boots lay trampled to pulp in the mire, along with her hat and blankets and the tent.

As the fire dried her wet clothes and warmed her chilled body she gazed up at Tyrrel, for once without a trace of coquetry.

"You saved me from those frightful hoofs!"

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Chavez."

"Don't joke, Dick! I mean it. Don will feel the same. If he doesn't, I'll make him!"

Tyrrel smiled at her fierce emphasis.

"Strikes me, it's Ante who's in order for the vote of thanks."

Pilar glanced around at the horse. He stood nearby in the fire-glow. Past his sagging head she saw his forelegs and chest all bristling with staghorn cactus.

"Oh!" she cried. "Poor old fellow!"

"Hard lines!" said Tyrrel. "I've known better country for joy-riding on a dark night."

After lighting a new and larger fire in the top of a dead juniper, he opened his knife and started to pry loose from Ante's skin the joints of brittle cactus stalk. Removal of the poisonous spines was very painful. The horse quivered and snorted. But between times he nuzzled the shoulder of his master.

The upblazing juniper branches did more than give light for Tyrrel's work. The small fire would have served that purpose quite as well. But the tree top flared high, a flaming red beacon in the black night.

Within the half hour Tyrrel heard a dull thudding of hoofs down in the sand of the valley. The gallop eased to a jog on the hill slope. Gerda rode into the wide circle of the fire-glow on her panting, lather-streaked thoroughbred.

As she swung to the ground she caught sight of Pilar, sitting up from her cozy nest in the grass.

"Thank God!" she cried. "My locoed fool of a horse bolted. But you, Dick, I might have known you'd make good!"

Tyrrel met the manlike grip of her hand with a good-natured smile.

"You're soaking wet," he said. "Get near the fire while I see to your roan. He's worse stuck up than Ante."

"Better shy clear of the crazy devil — or else hog-tie and muzzle him. He'll bite your head off."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Tyrrel.

He reached up to stroke Lobo's trumpet-nostriled muzzle. Instead of biting him, the thoroughbred nuzzled his hand. When Tyrrel jerked out one of the cruel joints of cactus, the tortured horse squealed and struck viciously with his front feet. Tyrrel deftly side-stepped and worked forward again, stroking the roan's lathered shoulder and neck.

He tore loose another chunk of the wicked barbed needles. This time Lobo snorted and jumped but did not strike. Again Tyrrel gentled him with caressing hands on his neck and starred forehead and velvety muzzle. Before he had finished jerking out the worst of the venomous spines, the thoroughbred was standing almost as still as had Ante.

Pilar, exhausted from her fright and the wetting, had cuddled down and fallen asleep. But Gerda still stood before the fire, gazing at Tyrrel and Lobo. Her wondering eyes glistened with an odd softness.

"How do you do it, Dick?" she asked. "One smash into buckhorn cactus will madden a steer. Lobo is bad enough at best——"

"I've known worse horses," broke in Tyrrel. "He's not really crazy. It's just temper and nerves. He knows I'm a friend — that I'm only helping him get rid of these damnable

poison barbs."

Gerda's voice sank to a half whisper.

"Don Quijote de la Mancha! I believe you could have gentled Still Hell!"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. Some outlaws are real devils or altogether crazy. Anyway, I had to bust that bad one. A gentled horse can't buck you into silver saddles and prize money."

"Why were you so keen for the money, Dick? You didn't ride for glory, judging by the way you shoved the saddle off on me."

Tyrrel pointed at the moon, which now came peering like a blue-white ghost through the broken clouds.

"Behold, fair maiden, the pale glamor of glory. It cuts no ice. It raises neither cash nor blisters on the cast-iron face of circumstances. Even as the flowers that bloom in the spring, it fadeth away like the tracks of a cowless broncho buster in the sands of a cow queen's recollections."

"If that's a personal allegory," said Gerda, "I deny the allegation and I'll wallop the alligator."

"It's my crawl," admitted Tyrrel.

He bent to tear the last joint of cactus from Lobo's quivering chest. Both softness and mirth left Gerda's eyes. She studied the Coloradoan's lowered head with a hardening gaze.

"You own up that you're out only for the money. Yet you gave me the saddle — when I would have paid what I bid for it."

"Welsh will tell you just why, Miss Keith. It was to make sure of putting through the deal over Howbert's steers — so I could get my divvy out of the good Kay Kay money, and help old Hack rustle the herd. Q. E. D."

Gerda slapped the cactus-bristling leather of her chaps with the lash of her quirt.

"Cut out that drivel! Answer me!"

"Why, if you're so set on knowing — I'm after the price of a brand. I want to be a king of cowmen and wed a sheep princess — or a cattle queen. What d'you say we hitch up, soon as I rustle a range and ——"

"You have a long, long trail to travel to the land of free ranges, cowboy."

The scoffing words ended in a derisive chuckle. But Tyrrel caught the hint of a quaver in the scornful notes. He replied with cool assurance.

"Ante dotes on eating up long trails. Besides, we must be pretty near that Tabru range you told about."

"We're on it now — and it's as dry as Death," said Gerda. She added bitterly, "The Kay Kay will be in luck if we manage to get half the herd over the mesa to water, alive. After such a stampede, they'll all be drags. And I forced the deal on Donnie!"

Tyrrel was shrewd enough to say no more. He fell to work with his wire nippers tweezering single cactus spines from Lobo's legs. Gerda had turned her back on him. Too angry over the stampede to rest or relax, she searched the slope for fuel.

The moon sagged down below the westward border of the thinning cloud rack, flooding the ridge top and valley with silver light. But the fire, fed with dead branches by Gerda, flared its high red beacon on the hill side.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CLASH

AS THE moon sank towards the skyline a hoarse hail broke the hush of the hour before dawn. Tyrrel sent back an answering yell. After a few minutes Redeye and Butch spurred their horses up the slope into the firelight. A glance showed Tyrrel that neither animal carried any cactus. Their riders had trailed along the hard-beaten path of the stampede.

Butch sidled up near the fire to fix his pig eyes upon the sleeping Pilar. Redeye stopped before Gerda.

"Where's the boss?" he demanded.

Gerda's head went up. Her eyes flashed.

"Are you trying to make yourself out more of a fool than you look? You certainly are a big one if you don't know by now that I'm boss of this drive."

The insolent stare of the puncher's one eye wavered and sank.

"'Scuse me, ma'am. No offense intended. I only meant Big Mat."

"No, you meant Mr. Welsh. What about him?"

"Nothing, ma'am. I just figgered he ought to 've showed up here before me and Butch. We seen him make a go to flank the stampede on the left."

"How about Mr. Keith and the rest?"

"Dunno, ma'am. Reckon we must 'a' out-run 'em."

"If they followed, they can't be far. Hustle more wood. You too, Butch."

As the pair swaggered past Tyrrel their looks were so ugly that he quietly faced away and drew out a clip of

cartridges to reload his pistol. He reached for the weapon. The holster was empty. He spoke to Gerda in an undertone.

"Strikes me, we've drawn a pair of black knaves in this hand, Miss Gerda. Better watch the play close. I've lost my gun. Used it to smoke up that bunch of renegades when the stampede started. Must have failed to shove it well down into the holster."

"I see. You want me to defend you, in case the boys get playful."

Tyrrel hid all sign of how sharply the sarcasm stung him.

"I'm thinking of your cousin, Miss Keith. You saw how Butch eyed her."

"And you saw how both buckaroos walked turkey when I showed them who's boss."

Tyrrel returned to his plucking of cactus spines. Gerda carried no visible weapon. In case she was not armed, there was only one thing for him to do if the two punchers should try to carry out the devilishness that their looks had threatened. He could not hope to save the girls, but he could give his life in their defense.

The unsavory pair came down the hillside, each dragging a mass of dead limbs. They threw the fuel on the big fire and turned scowling towards Gerda. To the vast relief of Tyrrel, he heard the sound of approaching hoof beats. Butch and Redeye morosely drew back to the far side of the fire.

Keith appeared, loping his horse up the slope. He jerked off his big sombrero, to mop his bald head and peer around through his fire-glinting spectacles.

"Pilar?" As he started the question his anxious glance perceived the huddled form of the sleeping girl. His voice sharpened with dread. "Good God! She's not — not hurt, is she?"

The cry wakened Pilar. She started up and threw out her arms to him.

"Oh, Don *Señor!* You've come too! You're safe!"

Keith deliberately got down out of his saddle and went towards the girl, walking stiff-legged in his heavy chaps.

"Your boots — your hat?" he queried.

"Back where the tent was," she murmured, more than half ready to whimper over the terrible memory of the death torrent that had so nearly overwhelmed her. "*Santisima!* I did not know of the danger. If Dick had not come and run off with me!"

"Didn't know? Yet a storm like that!" Keith's hours of agonized fear for her safety flared into the angry reaction of his relief. "You silly little fool — to stay in that flimsy tent, when you should have taken to the truck!"

The girl's smile faded. She crumpled down with her back to her guardian, her down-drooped face in her hands. He started to add to his reproof. Gerda put her hand on his shoulder.

"You've said enough, Donnie. Leave her alone. She must have been right under the hoofs of the herd when Dick picked her up. She'll not soon forget that stampede. It had even my hair trying to stand on end."

"Well, of course she is still a child. I'm sorry I spoke sharply," admitted Keith. He turned to Tyrrel. "That was riding, boy! We owe you a great deal."

"Forget it," said Tyrrel. "I had to run to save myself. Just picked up Miss Chavez on my way."

Pilar twisted about to fling a taunt at her guardian.

"He was Johnny-on-the-Spot. Where were you, I'd like to know? You'd have left me to be trampled! He did just what Gerda says — he pulled me right out from under the hoofs of those mad steers! *Poder de Dios* — how their eyes rolled! How they snorted and bellowed! But you didn't

care the least bit! You left me to be trampled——"

"That will do," interrupted Gerda. "Donald is right. You should have had sense enough to take to the truck."

"Easy, easy," soothed Keith. "We're all of us pretty well on edge."

"But I have the most cause to be, Donnie! The worst of the joke is on me. I forced the Kay Kay into the deal. There's a big chance that we stand to lose at least half of our investment by this night's work. Best I can do is to have you write off the loss against my share of the partnership."

Her brother met the impulsive offer with a smile.

"Wait until we round up the herd——"

He stopped short. From somewhere up over the hill muffled shots were booming into the dawn.

"Mat's gun," said Gerda. "Listen — one-two — one-two-three. He's signalling for help."

"Wait here with Pilar," directed Keith. "I'll take the boys."

He rode up the hill, followed by Tyrrel, Butch and Red-eye. Over the higher ridges to the east the gray dawn was blushing to a rose tint. By the time the four riders rounded the upper slope, the rose had flamed into scarlet and gold. Beyond the comparatively low summit of the ridge the dawn rays streamed before them across an intervening valley to the high, pine-darkened hulk of the Chupadera.

But not one of the men gave a second glance to the mesa. All had fixed their gaze upon the weird, lifeless ruins that lay sprawled over the little mesa of the hill's top. Blocks and rows of roofless, half-tumbled houses loomed cold and ashen in the dawn-light, like ghost-dwellings of their ancient builders.

Tyrrel had never before seen a pueblo ruin. He stared across at the ponderous walls of a huge building on the far

side. Like the lesser ruins, its masonry of pale gray limestone held the eye with its unearthly look of desolation and death.

But an outroar of pistol shots off to the right sent all four riders racing aslant the dead pueblo. They dashed past a block of tumbled houses and two pits that looked to Tyrrel like prospect holes. The shots were coming from another hole beside the second house group.

Butch yelled and fired an answering shot. Out of the hole blared back the angry bellow of Welsh.

"He can't be badly hurt," said Keith. "Your ropes, boys? All right, Mat. We hear you. Jugged yourself, did you? No broken bones, I hope."

"It's bad enough!" roared the prisoner. "Fool horse walked into this—" the explosion of wrath ended in a string of curses against horse and hole.

Keith peered down over the broken brink of the twenty-foot shaft.

"No chance to get the poor brute up. You'll have to shoot him, Mat."

"Not a bit of it. He broke his fool neck. Come on, you fellows."

Three ropes slid over the brink of the shaft. To the first one Welsh tied his saddle, bridle, saddle-blanket and canteen. While these were being pulled up, he fastened the second rope under his armpits. To help the four rescuers hoist him, he climbed the third rope, hand over hand. There being no curb to the shaft, the men had to drag him over the rounded brink.

He staggered to his feet, scratched and purple-faced and boiling with rage. The glare of his bloodshot eyes centered upon Tyrrel. He burst out in a fury.

"You skunk! The gall of you showing up here after what you did! I've got you dead to rights now, you——"

With the curse, Welsh jerked out his big pistol. Up went Tyrrel's hands.

"Hold on," he said. "I'm not armed. Lost my gun."

The muzzle of the big pistol did not lower. Tyrrel's cool look and perfect stillness alone kept the infuriated man from pressing the trigger.

"Lost your gun — nothing! You sneak! You're trying to stall just because I've got the drop on you."

"Ask Mr. Keith to look in my holster. Miss Keith already knows. Shoot — and be hanged for murder! My hands are up; my holster empty. You can't prove self-defense even with Butch and Redeye to back your oath."

Welsh swore another kind of oath. Butch and Redeye sidled around, ready to cover Keith. Their warped loyalty was not for the real head of their outfit that had hired them, but for its third partner — son of their fathers' boss in the old days.

Keith rallied from his amazement over Welsh's outbreak. Heedless of the menacing shift of the punchers, he jumped in front of Tyrrel.

"Wait, Mat!" he warned. "The boy is right. His hands are up."

"No reason for not shooting down a caught rustler."

"Caught? You're clear off your head!"

"That's the charitable word for it," put in Tyrrel. "Last night, at the outbreak of the stampede, he took two or more cracks at me. One of them burned this streak across my cheek."

"It was meant to burn a hole through your treacherous brain, you sneak!" bellowed Welsh. "Get out of the way, Don. I saw him start the stampede. He let the herd bust loose behind Gerda. He shot half a dozen steers to get the rest to going."

"Le's string up the dirty skunk," suggested Redeye.

His one useful eye cast a glance around in wolfish search for a tree. Butch started to coil in his rope.

"We c'n drop him into the hole, Red," he solved the treeless problem. "That'll do the business."

Keith backed a step closer to the threatened man. His pistol butt came temptingly within reach of Tyrrel. But the odds were three to one, and Keith would have been in line with at least some of the shots from the gunmen. Tyrrel kept his hands up.

"It's as you say, Mr. Keith. Mr. Welsh is clean off his head. A thunderbolt started the stampede. I shot the steers — three, not half a dozen — to try and head the rush. This charge is an open-faced lie. What motive could I have had to turn the herd loose?"

Welsh flamed with renewed rage.

"I'll show you who's a liar, you slick Dick! You and Jacarilla have had it framed up all along. With not a single one of all the steers rebranded, all you had to do was stampede 'em towards the Lazy S Bar. Jacarilla's been trailing us with his outfit, ready to run 'em back to his range."

The bald assertion gave Keith an opening.

"Hold on, Mat. Where's your proof!"

"Proof! Haven't you heard of Jacarilla's old tricks? This one's easier for him than rolling off a log. He couldn't have overlooked such a slick play if he'd tried to. It's a safe bet his outfit's already back-trailing the herd. Not a **KK** on one of the steers — only his own brand. How can we prove the rustling of a single head, even if we catch him with them off his own range? Stand clear, Don. We'll shove this skunk into the hole, strung on his own rope. Hurry up. We've got to move fast to head off the Sneaky Snake."

Butch shook out the loop of his rope, ready to whip it over Tyrrel's head. Keith did not budge.

"Three of a kind may beat one pair, Mat. But you'll not

make the play. You can't lynch a man on mere suspicion of rustling. I'm siding Tyrrel in this — to the limit."

The little man spoke quietly — so quietly that even the slow-witted Butch realized they could not lynch Tyrrel until they had first killed the senior partner of the Kay Kay. That, however, would not be difficult. Everybody knew that Keith was a poor shot and slow on the draw.

Redeye and Butch looked to Welsh for the signal of attack. He stood hesitating. Keith was Gerda's brother. The little rooster would do as he said. He would go the limit ——

Out of the corner of his eye the big man glimpsed Butch's swinging noose. The simple answer to his problem flashed into his hot brain. They had only to rope Keith first. His thin lips parted to shout the order. Off to his left came a clatter of hoofs on the fallen stones of the first ruins. He glanced around and suddenly lowered his pistol.

Gerda loped forward on Lobo. Behind the silver-rimmed cantle of the contest saddle Pilar sat clinging to her cousin's broad belt.

"What's the rumpus here?" Gerda demanded.

With the lowered pistol still in his hand, Welsh burst into a passionate repetition of his charges against Tyrrel. When he had quite finished, Gerda turned to the accused man.

"Well, what's the answer, cowboy?"

"If Howbert has been trailing our drive, it's news to me, Miss Keith. All the rest is feverish fancy, except one fact. I shot three steers. I did it trying to head off the stampede. That was started by a thunderbolt. It hit into the thick of the herd. You must have seen it."

"I did — and I saw you try to block that rush. Call off your war, Mat. You're all wrong over this. That thunderbolt must have queered your head, or at least your eyes."

There was nothing for Welsh to do but put up his gun.

Redeye and Butch viewed the act with a disappointment that verged upon disgust. Gerda caught their black looks.

"Hit out," she ordered. "This is no time for loafing. We're short two horses. Back trail and look for the cavvy. We'll circle the head of the east valley and see if the herd scattered on north. If you meet the rest of the boys, have them swing round from the southeast. *Vamos!*"

The pair shuffled to their horses, but paused to look at Welsh.

"You've got your orders," he growled at them. "Ride."

The two loped off to the southeast. Keith made ready to mount his big horse.

"I'll take Pilar myself," he said. "Lobo is too tricky."

"Just a moment," interrupted Tyrrel. "In Mr. Welsh's excitement he has made several unprovable assertions derogatory of me, and he has branded me with various unpleasant names. Before we start I'd like to hear an apology from him."

"Then you'll wait till hades freezes over," replied Welsh. "I stand by every word."

"Too much is enough," said Tyrrel.

He jumped with the quickness of a puma. Taken by surprise, Welsh had his pistol only half drawn when Tyrrel gripped his wrist. A twist whirled it down into the sand. Tyrrel kicked it away and ducked Welsh's lunge at his throat. Keith ran to pick up the automatic.

Welsh whirled to rush. He met a punch in the throat, followed by a slashing uppercut to the jaw. The blow jerked his head up and back so violently that his hat flew off. He bellowed and again rushed. This time Tyrrel sidestepped. As Welsh lurched past, he staggered him with a full-arm swing under the right ear. The big man stopped, half dazed.

"What you waiting for, Mat?" called Gerda, her eyes

glittering with delight. "You promised to bulldog him. When do you start?"

The mockery stung Welsh out of his daze. He made another bull rush, but this time with his fists raised to guard his neck and jaw. Tyrrel ducked under his guard and drove home two short-arm jolts to the solar plexus. For all his iron frame, the young cowman reeled and gasped . . . . but one of his down-clutching hands clamped on Tyrrel's forearm.

Had not Welsh been so badly shocked by the body blows, the utmost of Tyrrel's whalebone strength and cat-suppleness would have failed to break that terrible grip. As it was, he managed to wrench the arm free, at the cost of half his shirt sleeve, a few square inches of cuticle, and some badly bruised muscles.

The narrowness of his escape warned him against the risk of in-fighting. Once fast in Welsh's grip, he would have had as little chance as in the paws of a grizzly. Murder glared from the big man's bloodshot eyes. During the brief moments of arm clutching he had rallied from the body jolts. He advanced upon his enemy with hands no longer clenched but out-thrust, every thick finger crooked to clutch.

To knock out a strong fighter with bare knuckles is no easy matter even for a skilled boxer. Yet Tyrrel knew he never could wear down a man like Welsh in a long-drawn-out fight. He shifted backwards, waiting for an opening. Welsh's savage blue eyes flamed with exultance. He rushed.

Pilar's scream stabbed like a knife-thrust into Tyrrel's blood-singing ears.

"The hole — the hole, Dick! Behind you!"

He leaped sideways and whirled. Welsh barely managed to check his rush on the very edge of the shaft. He stood tottering. A slight shove would have plunged him headlong into the pit. Instead of pushing him, Tyrrel stepped away.

"How about that apology?" he asked.

Welsh recovered his balance. He faced about and charged, more infuriated than ever. Rage blinded him. Tyrrel coolly dodged and whipped in a hook under the left ear — the ear that bore the notch of the Lazy S Bar. Like the blow under the other ear, it staggered and half-dazed the big man.

Before he could turn, Tyrrel leaped in and brought his fist down like a hammer on the nape of the thick red neck. Welsh fell as if shot. He lay still.

"Good heavens, boy!" cried Keith. "You've killed him!"

"No! Stand clear, Donnie," commanded his sister. "He's only stunned. Let them fight it out."

Welsh pulled himself half up and sat swaying, his blue eyes still glassy and vacant. Tyrrel poised a step away, waiting for him to get on his feet."

"That apology?" he urged. "I sure do hate to break my knuckles any worse."

"*Ugh!*" gasped Welsh. "Can't fight a jumping flea. I'll own up this much — I haven't any proof of what I named you."

"I accept the apology," said Tyrrel. "Your woolly fancies don't interest me. Only keep them under your hat after this."

Gerda cut in on Welsh's angry reply.

"Let it ride, Mat. We need Dick till we pick up the herd and get it over the mesa. Time enough to resume your war after we've finished this drive."

CHAPTER XV

BURIED TREASURE

WELSH stared grimly at his horseless saddle.

"Sooner you hit out the better. I'm betting you'll find a big slice of the herd trailing east with the Sneaky Snake. Might leave me my gun, Don; no, I'll not use it on him. May need it for myself, though, if no one turns up with a horse for me."

"There they come now," said Gerda, "nearly a dozen remounts, and of course Jake jingling the bunch. We're bound to have some kind of a cavvy, long as that old wrangler can crawl into a saddle. If we take to airplanes, like some of the big outfits, I give you two to one, Jake will turn up with Pegasus."

"And the battle steeds of the Valkyries," chimed in Tyrrel.

This was Greek to Welsh. He scowled and heaved himself to his feet to signal the wrangler.

"We'll go on, Mat," said Keith. "Pilar has no saddle. She will have to ride with me until the truck turns up. Suppose you go down into the west valley and pick out the best route for the drive across the mesa. No one can come up to you in trail lining. Have Jake follow us with the cavvy."

"I'd better ride with Dick," said Pilar. "Ante is bigger than your horse."

"There will be plenty of remounts. You'll ride with me."

Sharply as Keith spoke, his reply seemed to please the girl. She smiled as she slipped over behind his saddle from the fidgeting Lobo.

Gerda led the way back aslant the hill top and down into

the east valley at a lope. There was desperate need for haste. The sun had swung up well above the horizon. Before it should pass across the sky and go down in the west a vast deal must be done if the herd was to be saved.

First of all, as many as possible of the thousand scattered steers must be rounded up. Then, though almost famished from lack of water and leg-weary from the long run of the stampede, they must be driven up and over the mesa top and down the far side. Any that failed to stand up on the hard trail or that were missed in the round-up, would perish of thirst.

The horses and riders faced the prospect of at least a day and night of still greater hardship. Until they should come upon the truck, every rider must go without food. That would not be a great privation, even for the girls. But the shortage of water was a serious matter in this arid semi-desert. The fierce dry heat of the upclimbing sun had already begun to parch throats.

Gerda came to a sudden halt in the deep sand of the valley bottom. She had noticed for the first time that the canteen was gone from her saddle. During the wild night run, the weight of the full canteen had broken loose its fastenings under the jolts of Lobo's mad leaps.

"How's your water, Donnie?" she asked. "I've lost mine — can and all."

Keith shook his canteen. His face went blank.

"Almost empty. Yet I was the one who warned the boys to tank up."

"It's all right," said Tyrrel. "Mine's full."

He unlashed his canteen and held it out. Keith shook his head.

"It's yours. I'm the one who blundered. I'll pay for it."

"You forget the girls, Mr. Keith. The truck is bound to show up by noon. I can hold out all right until then."

"Take it, Donnie," ordered Gerda. "You know you'll need it as badly as Pilar will without her hat. It's his head, Dick. He was sunstruck, back East, summer before last."

"That's why he can't wear a wig — not even a toupee," added Pilar. "He has to keep his head cool, the poor dear!"

Keith winced.

"Very well, Tyrrel. I'll take part for Miss Chavez and myself, if Gerda will take the rest."

"No, Donnie. Only one drink now for me, and the same for Dick. You and Pilar will need all that's left."

She tilted up the full canteen and drank deep. Tyrrel tilted it in turn. But he took only half a swallow — barely enough to moisten his dry mouth and throat. Sufficient for him that his lips touched the aluminum rim that had pressed upon Gerda's red lips.

Lobo was already loping off with her across the valley. Tyrrel urged Ante into a canter. The others followed at a jog-trot. The sand made heavy going, and Keith's horse carried a double load. Trotting is not easy on a rear rider. Pilar hooked her little hands in her guardian's broad belt, and heaved a sigh.

"Ah-oh! Look at Ante overhauling Lobo. Why didn't you let me ride with Dick?"

"Last night was enough," snapped Keith. "Haven't you any sense of propriety at all? We have to hold you in hand even here."

"You're not holding me in any way. I'm holding you. But Dick did. He held me tight in his arms — all those hours!"

Her guardian's ears glowed bright red under the big sombrero.

"That will do! You must realize how I . . . . besides, what do we know about the fellow? He may be an utterly worthless — no, I must admit he seems a fine boy, and he

has shown himself both decent and nervy. He saved you last night. If you're really interested in him, *niña*, I will make inquiries about him just as soon as possible."

Pilar made a very unladylike face at the stiffly erect back of the promiser. Her voice dripped with honey sweetness.

"You are most kind, *dueño mio*. When I marry I shall coax my *querido* to put all our money back into sheep. A man will do anything for love, will he not, Cousin Donald?"

"Not some things — that is, not if he *is* a man!" Keith ground out between his teeth. He peered angrily ahead at Tyrrel, who was already half way across the valley with Gerda.

The two were loping along side by side, their eyes fixed upon the sand between the bunches of tall brown grass and the scattered yuccas and cacti. They were looking for tracks of the steers. Had they wished, their search could have been carried on at racing speed. The only cattle on this dry range were the runaway steers. Their tracks would show plainly in the soft sand.

To the north a band of pronghorn antelope drifted off into the distance like a fleeting cloud shadow. But the searchers saw no cattle or cattle tracks until they came to the east side of the valley. There they found a wide beaten trail leading up a gap through the ridges.

"Band of three or four hundred head, back-trailing for the Lazy S Bar," remarked Gerda. "Looks as if Mat called the turn on old Jacarilla."

Tyrrel was studying the trodden sand.

"Not a horse track anywhere. The steers are trailing themselves back for the last water. Let's ride."

Gerda put Lobo into a full gallop. Within half a mile they began to overhaul drags of the band. Two miles farther they headed the leaders — the four survivors of the seven wild steers that had led the stampede. Nowhere was there

any sign of Lazy S Bar riders.

"My apologies to old Hack," said Gerda. "Twice to him, and once to you, Dick. Look at those four renegades. Hack advised me to turn the bunch adrift. You did the same. They've made us no end of trouble."

"Sorry I shot the other three," said Tyrrel. "But I'm going to see the Kay Kay on the hides of these four — or eat my hat. Here we go."

They rode at the foremost steers, yelling and waving their ropes. The renegades and a few others tried to bolt aslant up into the junipers. But the ridge side was steep, and they were dispirited from the terrible run of the stampede. The sprinting of Lobo and Ante soon turned all back down the gap.

The drive became tediously slow when it reached the tail end of the drags. These weaker steers could not be forced out of a slow walk. In the sandy bed of the gap the heat of the mounting sun was almost furnace-like. Even Lobo drooped his proud head. As Ante wove from side to side on the heels of the scuffling drags, Tyrrel sought to ease the dryness of his mouth by chewing the few bitter-sweet juniper berries that came within his reach.

At the mouth of the gap Keith and Pilar were waiting under the nearest juniper, up on the ridge side. When they rode down to join in the drive, Pilar's black hair was covered with an unfinished basket of hastily woven grama grass. From under its ragged edge she cast a coquettish glance at Tyrrel.

"Ah, *mi dulce — campeador!*" she appealed. "Is it not a creation?"

"Three hundred and forty-seven head," broke in Keith. "Gerda, you and Tyrrel have saved the day for us. Did you see anything of the Lazy S Bar?"

"All in Mat's mind. How about the rest of the herd?"

Her brother explained the situation in a few words. At dawn Slim and Gailor, the day wrangler, had begun to round up the herd from the south side. When Butch and Redeye joined them, Gailor scouted up the east side of the valley. No steers had drifted east except at the gap. Keith had sent Gailor back with Jake to help drive the main herd across into the west valley.

"We'll cut straight over with this bunch, and look for Mat," said Gerda.

Slower than ever, the driven steers plodded through the deep sand of the valley bottom and toiled up the slopes to the city of the dead. But at the top their laggard gait quickened suddenly into a shambling trot. Pleased yet puzzled, the riders followed at a walk. The leaders of the rush halted in a barren rocky draw over beyond the farther ruins.

Tyrrel peered at the huge main building. Its massive walls of ash-gray limestone flags were at least six feet thick, and towered up thirty feet or more to their unroofed broken parapets. The length of the great ruin was a good two hundred feet and its width almost a hundred and fifty. Tyrrel turned from it to the many crumbling honeycomb houses.

"Apartments to let. Sunny site. Open view. Good ventilation. Abundance of wells. All that's needed is water, inhabitants and modern plumbing."

"They're not wells, Dick," said Pilar. "A few are *kivas* — sacred council-chambers of the Pueblos. The rest were dug by the treasure hunters."

"Treasure?"

"Yes, of course. Tabru is where the Aztecs came when they fled from Mexico with the half of their great hoard of gold and emeralds that the Conquistadors failed to capture. They hid it here in this old, old pueblo, and for hundreds of years treasure hunters have searched for it — Spaniards and Americans. But it's never been found . . . . all those

millions and millions in gold and emeralds and maybe rubies!"

Tyrrel's mouth rounded in a big O.

"*Uh-uh!* That beats any lost-mine story I ever heard."

"Oh, there are many lost mines, too — all the Spanish mines that the Pueblos covered up when they massacred the colonists in sixteen-eighty. But the treasure here isn't unmined ore — it's pure gold and precious stones. My *padre* knew all about it. All the old families knew about the Aztec refugees."

Tyrrel rounded his eyes as well as his mouth.

"Aztecs? Then that big stone barn is one of their temples where they used to carve up human sacrifices to Huitzil-what-d'you-call-'im?"

"Piffle!" scoffed Gerda. "No Aztec ever came up this way. The people of this pueblo were just ordinary Tampiro Pueblo Indians. Your Aztec temple was only one of the old mission churches. The Franciscans built it before the massacre. After the revolt the Apaches came in from the east and wiped out the whole tribe."

"But, Gerda, you know that *padre* told me himself that the Aztecs ——"

"Pure myth, *niña*, like the Seven Cities of Cibola," explained Keith. "It is only one of those baseless pot-of-gold-under-the-end-of-the-rainbow legends that lure men to die of thirst in waterless places like this."

"One fool outfit drilled down over there through solid limestone — looking for that cached gold!" Gerda voiced her derision. "They actually expected to find *buried* treasure under fifty feet of solid rock!"

Tyrrel did not smile. There was not even a twinkle in his eyes. They glowed ruddily with the splendor of the vision behind them. His rounded lips came together in an unctious smack.

"*Um-m-m!* Can you blame the searchers? Think of the

fun of thinking you're just about to shove your drill into a treasure like that! How your heart would flutter and hop every inch you bored nearer to the hoard! And right down there, only a few feet deeper, that black hole, sealed with Montezuma's signet ring — and chuck full of nuggets and gold dust oozing out of the cracked rawhide sacks — and solid gold Aztec godlets with ruby eyes and emerald buttons — and gem-studded gold war clubs — and ——"

"Rolled gold and rhinestones," mocked Gerda. "This Aztec treasure is worth about one per cent of one share of wildcat oil stock. You'd make a great prospector, Dick. You have every qualification, except sense and savvy."

"Well, I might take a try at it sometime. I'll think it over."

Tyrrel gazed ahead to where the three hundred and more steers were lowing and shifting restlessly about in the barren, rocky draw.

"Just the same — about this cached treasure — isn't there likely to be some fire when there's so much smoke? Couldn't Montezuma's outfit have slipped up this way with the mint, while Cortez and all the historians were looking the other way?"

"Of course they could!" cried Pilar. "*Poder de Dios!* It is men like you, *Don Ricardo el Campeador*, who see things! It's the man of faith and vision who finds mines and treasures!"

"I am he," admitted Tyrrel with becoming modesty. "At least, I'm going to think it over. Just run your mental fingers through that fat, yellow gold dust, sifting out of those cracked pack-sacks! Wheelbarrow loads — truck loads — tons of gold!"

Keith was peering at the lowing steers, more than ever perplexed.

"First time I ever saw cattle act that way, Tyrrel. How

about you?"

"Might be they've found a salt lick, but are too dry to lick," jested Tyrrel. "Which reminds me. If all this country is dry as Miss Gerda says, those old-timer citizens of the town must all have belonged to the Antelope Clan. Pronghorns can go for months on dew."

"They had big tanks — reservoirs — over there on the far side," explained Keith. "The snow falls deep up here in winter. They could raise their corn, beans and squashes during the rains."

His sister swept the ridge top and slopes with her clear gaze.

"May have been a spring within carrying distance. They're apt to dry up in this country. Or perhaps the Tampiros killed theirs — if they ever had one. The people of more than one pueblo did that, when driven away or wiped out by the Navajos or Apaches."

Tyrrel looked back at the desolate, ash-gray ruins.

"If these folks killed their water, they seemed to have killed it dead. Their town's as dry as a Kansas farm burgh with a lady mayor. I'll have to pack in liquid refreshments as well as dynamite — if I decide to come and get that buried treasure."

Gerda uttered a scornful "*Bah!*" and gave Lobo his head. The others jogged after her, to drive the milling steers out of the draw and over the round, down into the west valley.

CHAPTER XVI

THIRST'S NECTAR

SOME distance south of the dead pueblo of fabulous treasure the stray band of steers was driven into and merged with the main herd. Slim, Butch and Redeye and the two wranglers had managed to force even the weakest of the drags over the ridges.

Old Jake made positive assertion that only three horses and not over fifty head of steers were missing. This, if true, was far better than had been expected. But many of the thirst-tormented beasts were already wobbling, and the drive over the mesa would not be easy even for the strongest.

Welsh came jogging down from a hard ride on the heights. As he shifted his saddle from his spent horse to a fresh one he told of a feasible ascent a little farther south.

The herd was at once started along the base of the mesa. But before it could be strung out in trail column, the chuck-truck came crawling out of a draw from the southeast. Regardless of the herd, all the riders loped to meet it. Every canteen, except the one given to Keith by Tyrrel, had been drained.

Butch, Slim, and Redeye, having no pity on their horses, were first to reach the truck. But Cookie barred them from the tap of the water tank with his fat body and a handax and his butcher knife. He held them off until the other riders arrived.

"What's the matter here?" demanded Welsh. "Stand clear, you bean-burner. We're all dry."

Cookie did not budge.

"I'm boss of this here chuck-wagon, and I'm going to

stay boss. My orders'll come from Miss Gerdy. It's her drive."

"All right, Cookie," said Gerda. "Let the boys drink."

"Nope—not till you've got it all sized up, ma'am. That gosh-danged sand is powerful hard sledding, and I got stalled in one them washes. Now here's the mesa to buck. It'll take every drop for the injine."

"But we must have water, you fathead," growled Welsh. "We'll leave the truck here and pack water back for it later."

The punchers started to close in.

"Hold on," urged the cook. "I'll bust you each a can of tomatusses."

"That beats alkali slough water any old time," said the appeased Butch. "Bust ahead, buddy. You're a sugar cooky."

"I got just two cans apiece, and one over for manners, gents. Cached 'em for this here contingency. Go slow if you figger on washing down any grub."

Gerda ordered him to set out a cold snack, along with one can of tomatoes for each person. She urged everyone to eat plenty of sugar.

"Best thing to stave off thirst and keep you going when dry," she told Tyrrel.

All were ravenously hungry, and they ate with the knowledge that they might have to go another day before the next meal. Near the end Cookie mentioned that he had seen two small bunches of drags, about thirty in all, lying down, seven or eight miles back over the hills.

Gerda looked at her brother. She spoke in a cool, rather hard tone.

"They may be too far gone to drive. But the Kay Kay isn't going to lose a head, if I can help it. Put Pilar on the truck, and help the boys. Dick will come with me. Hand

out our second cans, Cookie. It's for each one to use his own as he thinks best."

She left her can in the care of the cook. Tyrrel tied his in his slicker.

Ante and Lobo were still stronger than the broncho remounts. They had more speed and stamina than the smaller horses. The day was at its hottest when they brought their riders over the hills and south along the other valley to the farther bunch of drags.

When Gerda halted for a short rest before beginning the drive, Tyrrel drained the liquid from his can of tomatoes into her empty canteen. He then opened the can with his knife and wiped out the dry nostrils of the two horses with pieces of the juicy pulp. Though Gerda said nothing, her gray-green eyes warmed from their usual cool emerald beauty into soft loveliness.

The down steers were hard to get on their feet and no less hard to keep moving. But the heavy sand was avoided by working them up the ridge. Much urging kept them on the move along the top.

At last came the slant down into the west valley. Nothing remained of the outfit. Hours past, herd and riders and truck had all trailed away into the draw up the mesa side chosen by Welsh. Gerda looked soberly from the dusty trail to the lagging bunch of weary steers. The sun was already half down the western sky. She spoke without looking at Tyrrel, in a voice harshened by thirst.

"Cookie did not leave my tomatoes. These drags are trailing slower than the herd. Driving them, we can't hope to catch up. Chances are they'll all lie down and stay down before we make the far side. What's the use?"

"Why quit before we have to?" replied Tyrrel. "We'll save the whole bunch."

Gerda's response was to thwack her rope on a steer that

had stopped to kneel down. The little band plodded away up the draw in the broad hoof-ground trail of the herd. Their gait was the crawl of a tortoise — but of a tortoise that did not stop. Foot by foot they climbed up through the junipers and cedars.

Sunset found them among the pines, and still climbing. Twilight faded into dusk. The velvet blackness of night closed down upon the mesa. Overhead arched a dome of blue-black opal, studded with diamonds.

The cool of nightfall had brought a little energy back into the flabby muscles of the drags, and the trail was well marked by the thousands of scuffling hoofs that had gone before. The drags wobbled on along it. When the rising moon slanted its bright rays through the black pines, the riders counted their bunch and found that not one had turned away off trail.

They drove on and on, slowly but steadily, over the top of the mesa. The long hours dragged past — hours that to Tyrrel were a mingling of intense suffering with no less intense joy. The canteen had long since been drained; but each time that Gerda had opened it he had cheated her by taking only a few drops — not even enough to moisten his mouth.

That was now the chief cause of his suffering. His throat rasped from dryness; his lips were cracking; his tongue had begun to swell. Yet the very torment of his thirst added to his happiness. He had cheated Gerda into drinking all except a few drops. He had kept her from suffering the worst.

And there was also the blissfulness of her companionship. Side by side, they drifted along at the heels of the drags through the weird *chiaroscuro* of black pine shadows and brilliant moonlight. They drooped wearily in their saddles. For the most part they were silent.

But he felt that the girl was as intensely aware of his

nearness as he was of hers. He knew that, like himself, she would never forget this strange night-trailing over the high mesa — this sharing of weariness and thirst and solitude. To side a comrade in hardship and suffering stirs far deeper feelings than can be reached by the light-hearted companionship of pleasure.

Though every dragging mile added to his pain, Tyrrel felt more than contentment. Gerda was as he wished her to be — enduring, uncomplaining, serene, almost gentle. She showed no sign of her too-ready temper and scorn and pride. To him the weary night was not a night of misery but of joyous mystery. What thoughts, what emotions were behind those steady, long-sustained glances of the girl's shadow-veiled eyes?

The dejected steers dragged on. A hundred-foot up-slope would have stopped them no less hopelessly than a hundred-foot cliff. But the trail was now winding down the west side of the mesa. The leaden weight of their thick-set bodies kept the drags descending.

Sunrise found them down on the western plateau. Tyrrel raised his head to peer along the trail. For the first time Gerda saw his face in the clear light. It was gray. His eyes were sunken.

"You — thirst!" she choked out. "Eight miles to water. The drags — all in — done for. Ride!"

He shook his head. She insisted. He pointed. Miles away to the southwest a gray beetle was scurrying along in a cloud of dust that the sunrays glorified into a halo.

"Truck," croaked Tyrrel.

With hard-swung ropes they urged on the now-staggering steers. They covered less than a quarter-mile before the steers raised their down-drooped heads. A moment since they had been sagging, reeling, ready to drop in their tracks. Now they broke into a trot.

"They smell — water-hole," said Gerda.

The steers crossed a rise, lumbered down through a hollow past an arroyo, and climbed a ridge. Nearly a mile beyond they reached the point where the trail crossed an old half-beaten, round-up road. Along this road the truck came chugging and bumping to meet them.

Welsh was driving. He swerved alongside and around the steers to stop before the two riders. Keith reached out a full canteen to his sister. She wrenched off the cap and twisted around to Tyrrel. He drew back, signing for her to drink first. She spouted the water into his face.

Lobo and Ante were lunging forward to crowd up against the side of the truck. The steers also had smelled the water in the tanks. They wheeled and charged the truck in a frantic rush.

Gerda gave no heed. She was holding the canteen first to Tyrrel's lips and then to her own. Welsh and Keith, between them, managed to turn one of the full tanks around, spout inward. They drew buckets of water, which Ante and Lobo, thanks to their long necks, were easily able to reach. The young steers jostled and bawled in their wild yearning to get at the life-saving drink.

"Look at them," said Welsh. "Yet I'll bet they simply fell down off the mesa. Ought to 've seen the herd, Gerda. They were nearly as far gone. Smelt the water, though, a good three miles back. Ran us all the way to the hole."

The truck tanks held enough to give every one of the thirty odd steers a drink. The difficulty was to get it to them. Much water was spilled by their frantic struggling. But by a deal of persistence and some work with the horses, all were at last given at least half a bucketful apiece.

This was no more than a drop in the gullets of the famished beasts. When Welsh drove out of the mob and speeded the truck on along the trail towards the water-hole, the steers

pursued at a stampede run.

Gerda and Tyrrel turned into the round-up road and stopped to open their second canteen. Like their horses, they were already wonderfully refreshed. Tyrrel's sunken eyes glowed with renewed life. He found that he could speak, though his swollen tongue made his voice thick.

"Was — worth while. Saved 'em all."

"Thanks to you, Dick! Have another. It won't hurt us to drink it all, if we take only a swallow at a time."

"Don't mind if I do. You're a bully good side-partner, Gerda!"

The girl stared after the dust cloud of the fast-running truck and steers. She could not bring herself to let Tyrrel see the look in her eyes. All before her was Kay Kay range — her range! He was only an unknown broncho buster and contest rider. Pride blocked her intended surrender.

"You need a shave, buddy. I'm dying for eats and a good soak and — house clothes. Let's ride."

Tyrrel did not ask her to linger. He knew what he wanted and when. He could wait. He smiled at the girl's strong, beautiful profile, and put Ante into a lope.

CHAPTER XVII

DRESS AND REDRESS

THE Kay Kay ranch had once been the *hacienda* of a Spanish sheep king. The corrals and outbuildings were modern and American But the old *casa grande* was a two-story edifice of solid masonry, without a window on the lower floor. It had been built in the old days of Apache raids.

The iron-studded gates of the arched portale opened into a double *patio*. The outer one of these two courtyards was bare and uninviting. Upon it faced the rooms of the long "L" of the *casa*. These former quarters of servants had been turned into a cook and bunk house for employees. But Tyrrel found a sanitary bathroom, piped with hot and cold water.

He took his noon meal with Slim, Butch, and Redeye. Older Kay Kay men were riding herd on the newly arrived feeders. The trail punchers had orders to loaf for the rest of the day. Tyrrel sought his bunk.

Towards sundown old Jake wakened him.

"Curry off your burs, kid," he said. "Miss Gerdy says you're to feed at the bosses' manger."

Tyrrel had already drawn on the commissary for a change. He went shopping again. After that he worked on his trail-scuffed boots until they shone like black satin.

In the hot glare of sunset he found the garden of the inner *patio* a cool little paradise. At its center an old fountain of rough-hewn stone spouted clear water. Fruit laden peach and pear trees cast grateful shade. A mocking bird trilled and warbled in the upper branches. Beds of choice roses gladdened the eye and sweetened the air with their perfume.

A neat housemaid led him between the lower pillars of the two-storied veranda into the modernly furnished old *sala*. He found himself facing the family, all of whom were no less modernly furnished, in city style. Keith and Welsh wore tuxedos. The girls were in dinner gowns — that is, as much in as fashion permitted.

The unexpectedness of it all hit Tyrrel like a jab between the eyes. But he did not trip over his feet. Neither did he slip on the polished hardwood floor. He could skate and dance. Sight of the flesh-colored patch on the upper part of Welsh's left ear restored his mental balance.

With no slightest betrayal of embarrassment, he stepped forward to meet the hospitable hand of Keith. Somehow he failed to look out of place even side by side with the tuxedo. His new blue overalls, folded half way up his boot tops, had a tailor-like crease from the packing case. They were belted to his slim waist with a narrow silver-buckled strap. His silk shirt, soft collar and tie might have been borrowed from his older host. They were, in fact, part of one of Keith's personal purchases, left by mistake in the commissary.

He had already quite forgotten his own clothes. Pilar, with black eyes aglow, came dancing to meet him on the tiny toe tips and preposterously high heels of her very fashionable slippers. Her scarlet lips curved in a Cupid's bow as she smiled. For the moment her child-like prettiness entirely filled Tyrrel's eye. With her flame-colored dress and high-piled black hair topped with a diamond-studded old Spanish comb, she looked like a fairy imitation of Carmen.

"*Buenos noches, mi dulce campeador!*" she greeted him. "I'm going to reward you for forcing your canteen upon me and Don *Señor*. You're to be my partner, so that I can give you my grapefruit and sherbet."

"Couldn't think of robbing you, Miss Chavez. I've been eating lemons all afternoon."

As Tyrrel spoke he drew the girl about to where Gerda sat waiting beside her hard-faced, stiffly erect second partner. Welsh was in an ill mood. He did not relish the presence of the contest rider in the family circle of the Kay Kay, and he made no effort to conceal the fact.

Tyrrel, however, had no trouble in ignoring his rival. The real difficulty would have been to turn his eyes and attention from Gerda. It was the first time he had seen her in any other dress than her riding skirt and the motoring costume she had worn at the rodeo.

The fine silk of her stockings enhanced the shapeliness of her ankles. Her graceful shoulders were milk white. The diamond pendant of her emerald necklace flashed on her snowy bosom below the beauty hollow at the base of her strong round throat.

Her gown left in Tyrrel's mind no more than a blurred impression of artistry and costliness. He realized but vaguely how its pale gold heightened the rich color of her cheeks and the golden gloss of her hair. His only clear perception was that her gray-green eyes were sparkling with a cold brilliancy like that of the emeralds in her necklace.

As he met their half-mocking gaze the truth flashed upon him. She had chosen to put him to this cruel test. She had deliberately planned to flaunt in his face the contrast between her wealth and his poverty. His overalls had been invited into the parlor to realize their cottonness alongside the sheen of silk. He smiled. She herself had once derided him for being afraid of a girl's money.

"Good evening, Miss Keith. It was most kind of you to ask me to dine with the family."

"You've been a dude-wrangler," accused Welsh.

"Guilty, sir. It's a very pretty string of green glass you're wearing, Miss Keith — and the gold effects. Makes me think of that treasure up in Tabru — the gold and

emeralds."

"Which aren't there!"

Tyrrel's face lengthened.

"It's not polite to contradict a lady. But at least they were there during your visit. Emeralds in her eyes and gold in her hair; teeth of pearl 'twixt ruby lips — priceless treasure from Tabru!"

The confusion was not his but Gerda's. The rose in her cheeks deepened. Her eyes wavered and sank. The prim voice of the maid announcing that dinner was served made welcome diversion for her mistress. Welsh aggressively offered his arm. Tyrrel's eyes twinkled as he followed the couple with Pilar. He had scored.

Throughout the meal his partner devoted all her smiles and pretty arts of coquetry to him. She talked vivaciously about flowers and jewels, thanked him extravagantly for giving his canteen to her and her guardian, and no less extravagantly praised the skill and courage that he had shown at the rodeo.

She was deaf to the remarks of Keith, at her other elbow, and blind to the warning glances of Gerda. Tyrrel followed her airy lead with frank enjoyment. Now and then he referred some point of the talk to Gerda, blandly oblivious to her coolness. Welsh sought to start a conversation with her, and succeeded no better.

But with the dessert the mistress of the Kay Kay roused to action. Before Pilar realized what was happening, Tyrrel had been taken away from her. With cool mastery, Gerda held possession of the guest. He was only too willing to talk to her. No less imperiously, she brought her rather dejected brother into the conversation, and after him the heavily reluctant Welsh. Pilar was left solitary in the midst of the crowd.

With the coffee the younger girl somehow found herself

paired off with her guardian. Gerda was devoting all her attention to Welsh and Tyrrel. Her beautiful eyes glinted and flashed and sparkled as she played them against each other. Very adroitly she inflamed their rivalry and antagonism yet kept Welsh in check.

The moment Tyrrel perceived her game he covered his dislike of the big man under a show of good-humored tolerance. This served only to increase Welsh's resentment. His ill-feeling threatened to burst into open eruption. He had become a smouldering volcano of jealousy.

Gerda smiled and put out a restraining hand to him as she rose from the table.

"Don't bother, Mat. Have another cup of coffee. Pilar will pour it for you. I'll have Dick help me sort out the dance records."

Welsh dropped down again in his chair. But his cold blue eyes followed Tyrrel out with a look far from pleasant. In the *sala* Tyrrel spoke with blunt directness.

"What's the idea? He already hated me like poison."

The sparkle of the girl's eyes flashed into scorn.

"Want to quit?"

He caught her hand and skated her across the floor to the cabinet phonograph. His first act was to cull out and stow away the jazz records brought south by Pilar.

"When I dance with you I want real music," he said.

They were waltzing to the melodious old *Language of Flowers* when the others came in.

With Pilar, Tyrrel skipped and whirled around the big room like a lively schoolboy. She recommended his style to Keith, who immediately became all the more precise and orderly in his steps and reverses.

Gerda danced, turn about, with the rivals, equally gracious to each. But she did not lessen Welsh's jealousy by her remark that Tyrrel was the better dancer.

A full hour before midnight she broke up the party with curt decisiveness.

"Bed time for you, Pilar. You haven't yet caught up from the drive. Take a smoke with Donnie, Mat. I want to show Dick how the *patio* looks by moonlight."

Welsh turned and went off up the old stairway, his face as expressionless as a granite mask. Regardless of Gerda's order, Pilar put on another waltz. But Keith wiped his spectacles and bald head and peered after his partner with a troubled look.

His sister took Tyrrel's arm and started for the veranda. Her eyes shone like her emeralds. Out in the moonlight their hard brightness seemed to warm and soften. She led Tyrrel from the colonnade, around the black shadow of a tree, to the jetting, tinkling fountain. Beside their elbows bloomed a bed of American Beauties. Gerda breathed deep, drinking in the delicious odor of the roses.

"What do you say to this, Dick? Harem garden of the Moors, imitated by the Spaniards. Doesn't it make you think of the Arabian Nights?"

Tyrrel ransacked his memory.

"Yes. There was that tale about a *peri* — one of those Arabian fairies. This is a little piece of paradise — with you in it."

"An earthly paradise. Mat may prove to be the evil *jinni*."

"Oh, him! I'll take it back about the *peri*, Gerda. You're more than that. You're a glorious American girl!"

"So you've at last found your tongue," mocked the glorious girl.

He looked close into her wide unwavering eyes.

"Have you forgotten last night, Gerda — riding, riding, riding, up and over and down the mesa? Black bogie shadows across the moonlight; the night breeze mourning through the

pine tops; horses' heads sagging; the drags scuffling dust. Hell in our throats, and heaven in our hearts!"

Gerda put up her strong hands and gripped his shoulders.

"Boy, it's time to say good night."

She leaned forward and kissed him full upon the lips.

With all his quickness, she was gone before his outflung arms could clasp her.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE BACK

THE rebranding of the Lazy S Bar steers began at sunrise. With the combined force of old ranch hands and new punchers, the work of putting the herd through the branding chutes went forward rapidly.

Welsh had charge. Keith and old Jake kept tally. The girls did not come out to the corrals at any time. For this Tyrrel felt thankful. He knew that Gerda had not remained away because of any shrinking from the brutal business. She would take it as a matter of course. She was a cattle woman. Yet he did not like to think of her looking on at such work . . . . especially after what had happened in the moonlight, beside the fountain of the *patio*.

This did not mean that he was a milksop. Welsh had told him off as one of the branders. With workmanlike precision and thoroughness, he thrust his white-hot iron through the spaces of the chute rails and branded the **KK** on the young steers as fast as they could be penned between the chest and tail bars.

The smell of seared hair and hide, the struggles and bawls of the huge calves, never for a moment stayed his hand. The branding had to be done by someone. It was a necessary requirement of cattle raising. He was no shirker.

Every brand that he burned was unblurred and deep enough to last the natural lifetime of a steer. The three-inch Lazy S Bar brands had stretched a foot or more during the first year and a half's growth of the steers. The **KK** branded in by him also would stretch until the animals reached full growth or were shipped to market; but the letters would

always be neat and clear cut. He did his work well, unpleasant as was the task.

The mood of his fellow branders was different. Butch, who heated the irons for him and shifted the chute bars, spat tobacco juice at the wild eyes of the yearlings. Between times he shouted coarse gibes across at Slim and Redeye, crew of the other branding chute.

That choice pair were having hilarious fun. They took turns burning brands unnecessarily deep and then jabbing the steers in tender spots with the corners of the hot irons. Their cruel sport ended only when Welsh came around and ordered them to cut out the trifling. He joined in their roar of laughter over the high jump and agonized *blatt* of a tortured yearling. But the game had slowed the run through their chute. Over at Tyrrel's the steers were popping out into the open in rapid succession.

As the sun mounted higher, its blistering rays by no means tended to lighten the labor of the branders. The three men from Lincoln County became morose. They cursed the steers and gibed at each other and Tyrrel with a growing bitterness.

Tyrrel's good-humored replies failed to disarm their sour rancour. Yet they did not quite cross the line with him. The quiet steadiness of his look stopped them just short of the unforgivable epithet. They knew he had lost his pistol. But a quick and angry man with a white-hot branding iron is no mean opponent, and they were not quite in the mood for murder.

Another restraint was that Keith sang out an offer of twenty dollars for the crew that branded the most steers. He wished to get the trail-thinned feeders out on good grass as soon as possible.

Butch ceased gibing at his mate and fell to work with a will. When the last steer of the herd was run through, out of the big corral, the tally of Tyrrel's chute stood forty-three

over five hundred.

"Not so bad," Keith remarked to his partner when he had checked up old Jake's tally and added the total to his own. "Only six short of the full thousand. You must have started from the Lazy S Bar with the excess number as tallied by Gerda, or else the strays from the stampede were fewer than we have figured."

"Old Jacarilla was dead sure of rustling a big bunch from us on the trail. That's why he threw in the extras at the delivery," replied Welsh. "It's the sure proof he schemed with Tyrrel. I tell you, Don, that slick Dick started the stampede."

"Nonsense, Mat. Gerda saw that thunderbolt strike into the herd."

"And I saw him use his gun to jump the rush into a full stampede. Only thing, he failed to head the steers back over the hills to Jacarilla. They took their own route — ran clear away from the Lazy S Bar outfit — fooled the rustlers."

"Mat, you're riding for a fall. Can't you see it's just Gerda's idea of good sport, setting you and the boy at each other's throats? She doesn't realize . . . . you've been a good friend and partner, Mat. Stop and think what this will come to, if you don't get yourself in hand. With not a shred of evidence against him that would hold water in the courts, you've accused the boy of rustling; you've shot to kill him. There at Tabru, when he stood unarmed and hands up, you would have shot him or lynched him."

Welsh did not give ground an inch.

"He's a sneak and a rustler."

"You mean, you're mad with jealousy because Gerda favors the boy."

"I've sized up the snake. It's not rustling alone. You'd better ride herd a bit closer on Pilar."

Keith went white about the nostrils.

"That will do, Welsh. When I wish advice from outsiders on my family affairs, I will ask for it. For another thing, I have no wish to continue in partnership with a man who contemplates murder — no, don't try to deny it. That is what it amounts to. You will give me your promise to leave the boy alone, or I will put you out of the Kay Kay, as provided in the partnership agreement."

"Dammit, you'd not do that!"

"It is that or your promise. You're a first-rate cowman. You've helped the Kay Kay. But this is not a matter of cows or money. I'll have no man near my sister who shoots on suspicion — to get rid of a rival."

Welsh failed to outstare the gray eyes behind the shell-rimmed spectacles. He took thought. Donald Keith was a very genial, very mild man. But no one had ever known him to back up, once he ceased to smile. There was the chance that Gerda's contrariety could be played upon. She might leave the Kay Kay with the outgoing partner, just because her brother chose to put him out. It was, however, a long shot to play. No one could count upon the girl's moods. Welsh capitulated — with mental reservations.

"All right, dammit! I back up. If you want to nurse the sneak, I'll consider him your lammie babe. When you find out that I'm right about him, and things come to a showdown, I'll give him first draw. Is that enough?"

"Yes — if you mean it."

Keith faced about and walked off between the chutes to where the branding crews were waiting for the irons to cool. He handed Butch and Tyrrel each a pair of five-dollar bills and stalked back past Welsh. He was a man very hard to anger. But Welsh, only slightly aware of what he was doing, had seared the very soul of his partner with a white-hot branding iron. The brand spelled "*Pilar*."

Back at Butch's scattered fire, Slim and Redeye were

sidling up to Tyrrel.

"Le's have a look at that long green, buddy," suggested Slim. "Reckon Goggle-Eyes figgered on it being split four ways — a five-spot all round. Red and me'll take over the two he handed you for us, and you can collect yourn from Butch."

Tyrrel smiled and half raised his hands.

"Here are two fives. Which of you will have which? Take your choice. You can both collect them at one and the same time if you prefer."

In some manner a rumor of what had happened to Welsh at Tabru had leaked out. None of the three gunmen knew how to use his fists or wished to learn. They drew back from Tyrrel. Butch jeered his prizeless mates.

"Why don't you call his bluff and rake in the pot? A pair of sixes beats a pair of fives any old day."

The smile remained on Tyrrel's lips but left his eyes. He might have been able to jump one of the gunmen, as he had jumped Welsh, before the fellow could draw. But two pistols were impossible odds. Also, Butch was quite capable of shooting him in the back. And Welsh was approaching. It was a nasty corner. All the other men had gone off with the herd. The chutes and corral had him penned in on three sides.

Redeye appealed to Welsh with a devilish mockery of righteous indignation.

"Oh, kind sir, make this stiff come through. Glass-Lamps entrusted him with our hard-earned pay, and he's done gone and embezzled it."

"Just Mr. Keith's mistake, boys. Here are yours," said Welsh. He gave a ten-dollar bill to Slim and another to Redeye, and nodded to Tyrrel without a trace of expression on his big sunburnt face. "I'll ask you to take the irons to the blacksmith shop. Some of them need straightening."

Tyrrel walked out of the trap, no less amazed and puzzled over his escape than were the disappointed trio. He passed beyond earshot before Welsh spoke again.

"No more hazing in the open. Savvy?"

The friends of his boyhood knew him better than did the Kay Kay. His poker face told them that he had sat into a game that meant high stakes.

"What you say goes with us, Mat," agreed Redeye. "We're wised up. Stack the cards to suit yourself. We're here to play 'em for you."

"*Are* you here, or are you on your way? That's the first question, boys. The drive is ended. Keith does most of the hiring and firing. You bunglers managed somehow to rile Miss Keith, morning after the stampede."

Slim hastened to wriggle clear.

"I got my *alibi*. Was way back, rounding up the herd."

"Butch and me didn't do nothing," Redeye no less hastily sought cover. "Butch just happened to squint towards the little one."

Welsh turned his cold gaze upon the slowest-witted of the men.

"Miss Keith and her cousin are ladies."

The look that went with the bare statement wrung an abject mumble from Butch. He cringed. In years past, Welsh had more than once beaten him like a dog.

"'Ladies' it is, Mat," wheedled Slim. "Stick in a good word for us with the lady boss. We're backing your game to the limit."

Welsh's eyes glinted.

"I'll remember that."

He went direct from the corral to the *casa*. As he expected, he found Keith and Gerda in the office. The girl met him with a smile that told she knew nothing about his dispute with her brother. She smoothed the silk folds of

her sage-green afternoon dress.

"Been having a good, lazy *siesta* with Pilar," she said. "Just came down to hear Donnie's report. I'm mightily relieved. Only six head short of an actual thousand!"

"It's not the trifling loss in numbers," replied her brother. "What hits us hard is the shrinkage. In the stampede alone they ran off thousands of pounds. The extra day without water and the additional miles of trailing increased the shrinkage fifty per cent."

Gerda's head went up.

"Charge it to my account. I forced the deal. The loss is on me."

"No, on that night storm — and that fellow Tyrrel," put in Welsh.

Keith forestalled his sister's angry reply.

"We'll come to Tyrrel in a minute. The storm alone was to blame. It alone is chargeable with the loss. Worst of it all, not a drop fell over on our side of the mesa. Bad sign — the rains are apt to be late."

"That means we'll need plenty of riders," said Welsh. "With all these feeders, we can use more, anyway. May have to rush them to leased range. Strikes me, it will be as well to hang onto those three old-time side-kicks of mine."

The play was shrewd. More riders really would be desirable and might become necessary. He had classified the three punchers, not as strangers or mere hands, but as his friends. No less shrewdly, he had put the matter as a suggestion, not as a demand.

Gerda's generous mouth relaxed in a half smile.

"Well, I'm free to admit I don't like the fellows. But they can ride. I've no complaint to make against their work."

"Two new men will be enough," said her brother. "We'll lay off that fat-faced one — Butch."

"Where's your arithmetic, Donnie? One from four leaves three. Don't forget Dick."

"I haven't. He goes — for the same reason as Butch."

"Indeed? What may that be?"

With the white, pinched look about his nostrils that had checked Welsh, Keith very quietly answered with a single word ——

"Pilar."

For a moment Gerda's beautiful eyes clouded with doubt and suspicion. Then she caught the glint of exultance that Welsh could not entirely mask. Her red lips curved in a disdainful smile.

"So that's it, Mat! You'd pair Butch with Dick! You're willing to shuck off the most worthless of your three, in order to get rid of my one."

Welsh stood his ground.

"I don't want to shuck off any of them. Butch meant no harm. He can't help it having a squint."

"If that is so, I am willing to keep on all three," said Keith.

"All four!" amended his sister.

"I said three. Keep your temper, Gerda. This time Mat votes with me. The child is too young to be blamed. But Tyrrel is not."

Gerda chuckled.

"Poor little kitten — with cactus claws! But she's safe now."

"How?"

"Wait and hear. I'll have him tell you at dinner."

"The fellow shall not sit at table with Pilar — and you — again."

"Don't be so sure of that, Donnie. I run the house. What's more, he stays on the Kay Kay, whether or not you keep Mat's gunmen."

Not the girl's determination, but his innate sense of fair play suspended her brother's decision. After all, the accused had not yet been given a chance to meet the charges against him.

"I will listen to what the man has to say."

"You certainly will — and Mat will too."

CHAPTER XIX

QUEEN'S CHOICE

THE second invitation to dinner put Tyrrel into a glow and at the same time flustered him. He became acutely conscious of the incongruity of his dinner costume. Somehow, after what Gerda had done, there in the *patio* garden, he had lost his unconcern over his dress. Though a man can no more than do — and wear — his best, he went to meet her, inwardly quaking.

He found all but one of the family dressed no less formally than on the first evening. The exception was Gerda. She still wore her sage-green afternoon frock. The dress was artistic and expensive, but it was not a dinner gown.

Tyrrel sensed the distinction, and rallied from his blue funk. But the cool indifference of the girl's manner checked his delight. She betrayed no slightest trace that she remembered the kiss. As on the previous evening, she permitted Welsh to escort her to the table.

Pilar had greeted Tyrrel even more coquettishly than before. When Keith stepped between them and drew her arm under his own with brusque authority, she pouted and beckoned Tyrrel around to her other side, so that she entered the dining-room between both men.

At table she at once turned her dimpled shoulder on her guardian and started to flirt with Tyrrel. Gerda saw the distress of her brother, and promptly broke up the game of the little coquet. Throughout the meal her wit and will compelled even Pilar to share in the general conversation.

In return for his sister's support, Keith restrained himself until the coffee had been served. His concern would not

let him wait any longer. He broke in at the first pause.

"Pardon me, Gerda, but dinner is nearly over. How about that matter you said Tyrrel would clear up?"

Gerda smiled and reached out her left hand across the corner of the table to Tyrrel. Too surprised even to conjecture what this might mean, yet quick to respond, he clasped the hand. She cast a half-mocking side glance at Welsh, and spoke to her brother.

"You see, Donnie, there's no grounds for what you fancied. Dick is engaged to me."

From Pilar burst a little shriek of amazement that sounded like delight but ended in a pout. Welsh slowly rose to his feet, his face flushing a dark red.

"If you mean this for a joke, Gerda," he said, "it's a mighty raw one."

"Indeed? Well, I did not count on it bringing a laugh from you."

"No, the real joke is that prize you've drawn. 'Did Red-eye tell you how the man you've picked, rolled in the dust with sheep-herders to grab the measly ten-dollar stake of the greasers' sack race?"

The girl's broad eyebrows peaked with mock distress.

"I hadn't heard of that. Why, he seemed to've had a regular epidemic of top-stakes winning — caught first money pretty nearly all around."

"That's the word — *money!*" said Welsh. "He can ride and he can rope. Admitted. But that greaser race showed him up for what he really is. He'd sell his grandmother's teeth to get two bits."

Tyrrel gazed pensively across at the gold tooth exposed by the up-drawn corner of the big man's lip.

"I'm so sorry, but you're very sadly mistaken, Mr. Welsh. I haven't any grandmother. Even if I had, she'd have no teeth; and if I had and she had, it wouldn't pay me to sell

'em, because she wouldn't have any gold ones. They're out of style."

Welsh abruptly left the table and the room, without asking to be excused. In the blank pause that followed his going, Tyrrel smiled at Gerda and she smiled at her brother. He peered from her to the pouting Pilar, and then at Tyrrel, with more of doubt than of concern in his look.

"You must realize this means one less partner in the Kay Kay, Gerda."

"I'm not asking him to quit, Donnie. But he is welcome to do so if he wishes. Come, Dick."

"Just a moment. Tyrrel, my sister will marry whatever man she chooses, regardless of what I think. But if he is worthy of her, he will be the kind who values the approval of his wife's brother. I'd like you to name your references—if you have any."

"I have two kinds, Mr. Keith. Which do you prefer? I'll give you samples of each. Group A includes such as Ante, Miss Flora Macintyre, old Jake, Jacarilla Howbert, Lobo, and my *fiancée*. In Group B I'll put Mr. Welsh and his three of a kind."

"That's trifling——"

"No, sir. Their opinion of me is a first-rate recommendation. I count upon being loved for the enemies I have made."

"You have told me only what we already know," snapped Keith. "Who are you? What have you done? What is your family?"

Gerda flushed and broke in hotly:

"Mind your own business, Donnie! If I'm satisfied with Dick, that settles it."

"Please, ma'am!" pleaded Tyrrel. "He asks what I've done. Please can't I brag?"

The humorous twinkle in his eyes checked her anger. She could not repress a smile. On the instant he rattled into a

get-it-all-out-in-one-breath recital:

"I've beaten carpets; I've beaten my way; I've beaten some bunco games and a few fair-to-middling light-heavyweights. I've shot craps, lumber chutes, and deer out of season. I've ridden airplanes, the rods, the water-wagon, 'most everything on four legs, and some on two. And now I've ridden you of Mr. Welsh's present company."

Keith met this banter with biting sarcasm.

"Very humorous — very! If your family is in keeping with your achievements, we'll know what to think of them."

"Can't prove it by me," said Tyrrel. "I haven't any. Like Napoleon, I'm mostly my own ancestors. My earliest recollection is trying to stick on a bucking burro. Was then a three-year-old, going on four. I didn't pull leather. But the barkeep who had backed me to win, kicked my back because I took a spill. Our youthful hero had no fond mother to wipe away his tears and kiss quiet his cusses."

The mirth-sparkling eyes of Gerda suddenly glistened into dewy softness.

"O-oh, Dick!" she murmured.

His hand tightened its clasp, but he rattled on in the same tone of light raillery:

"I missed out on the maternal slipper and the paternal belt. But I had enough quirting to toughen my hide. Cowman who gathered me in as a maverick was an old-line Scotch Presbyterian — didn't believe in sparing the rod. He has gone to his just reward."

"Then you have no family?" Keith caught at the grain in the chaff.

"Not what you mean. Used to fancy myself the lost prince or the wandering heir. All turned out to be free air and wandering prints. No glamor — no romance. Happened to run across that old barkeep six years ago. Pounded the truth out of him. My father was an engineer. Came to Colorado

for his health. Married a nester's daughter. Snowslide wiped out ranch and all. Barkeep was hunting rabbits. Found me on top the slide, with forty feet of busted jack-pines, cabin logs and snow under me. Biggest ride I ever made."

"That's enough," murmured Gerda.

She rose and led him out into the *patio*. Behind them Keith irritably mopped his bald head. He polished his glasses. As he replaced them he met the intent, somber gaze of Pilar's black eyes. His frown smoothed out.

"It is up to Gerda now. She is the one who will have to pay for her willfulness. At least it saves me the necessity of sending you back to the convent."

The black eyes went hot with chagrin.

"Is that all you have to say? First Gerda, then you! She's a selfish pig! She knows I don't want Mat, he's just the right kind for her! If I *had* wanted him, he would have been her choice. Now of course she has to rope the only other man on the ranch!"

Keith winced as if struck on a raw sore. He jumped up and left the room even more abruptly than had Welsh. Pilar watched him out with bitter scorn in her wide eyes. She thrust clear of the table and stamped her little foot so hard that the giddy heel of the slipper snapped off. Then she flung herself down in a chair and wept.

Out in the garden Gerda would have led across to the stone bench at the far side of the fountain. Tyrrel stopped her under the pear tree. She sought to push past him. He put his arm about her and held fast with a strength that she could not have overcome even if she had really tried.

"Glory Girl, wait. Last night you gave me something that I'll have to return!"

She met his kiss with a delight as intense as his own.

"You D'Artagnan boy! Only one now. Remember, I'm the queen."

"And I'm Your Majesty's humble — no, I'll be damned if I'm humble. I'm proud as a peacock. I've been picked up by the queen for prince consort. I salute Her Majesty!"

Instead of waiting to receive the kiss, Gerda caught his face between her hands and, with generous warmth, gave the salute to him.

"There," she said. "Now come and pick me a bunch of roses."

They drifted out from the shadow of the pear tree and across to the moon-silvered bed of American Beauties. Tyrrel had no knife with him. Regardless of thorns, he broke off a dozen or more of the big long-stemmed buds. No less heedless of the thorns, Gerda clasped the sheaf to her softly heaving bosom.

"Now we'll sit down, and you'll tell me about yourself, Richard Cœur de Lion. I can do without the telling, but you can't."

"You're a wise woman! There's little enough to tell. I dodged the draft by sneaking into the Marines before the conscription law could be passed. Got roped off the transport just before she left her corral. Had applied for the Air. Broke in. Tenth time up, a broken wing broke my arm and collarbone. Got shipped West with a gassed Major to buy mules. That's as near as I came to getting over."

"But your record gets over with me, Dick."

"You haven't heard the worst of it. Last season the cattle outfit of which I was foreman sold out to an irrigation project. The promoters let us all in on the ground floor — and out through the cellar. I had staked everything on the deal — bunch of cows, home, all my cash. Bottom dropped out of the cattle market, down onto the crashed project. That's how I came to turn up at the rodeo with Ante and a rope."

"And you put your rope on me! Boy, my heart hopped

right over Butch's longhorn that you spilled just one jump short of Donnie. *Whoa!* Back up. There's still one more fence to cut. Who's Miss Flora Macintyre?"

"My first and only real lady-love before I met-up with the Kay Kay. Sandy Macintyre was the man who quirted me along the straight and narrow way. Flora supplied the salve and jam. She's a darling — and she's going on seventy. Luckily, I managed to cash in for enough to buy her a livable annuity when I joined the Marines. I'm to send for her, soon as I get my own roof over me."

"That need not be long, Dick. She shall have Pilar's rooms — next to ours."

Tyrrel's response to this was not made in words.

CHAPTER XX

HAZARDOUS PLAYS

PILAR did not come down to breakfast. Gerda rode off with Tyrrel and her brother, to put in the day inspecting the drought-shrunken water-holes.

At lunch time hunger dragged the younger girl out of her seclusion. She had treated her face with artistic skill. But Welsh's blue eyes were keen as steel. Under the girl's make-up they perceived traces that betrayed the night of weeping.

He curtly dismissed the maid and started to serve the meal in grave silence. Pilar's forced gaiety won from him only a look of sympathetic concern that deepened into commiseration. She gave over the attempt at mirth.

"What a killjoy you are!" she complained. "Your face is long as a mule's."

"Don't expect me to feel frisky, do you — any more than you do yourself? You poor little girl! It's a dirty shame. Looks like we're mired down in the same slough."

"The Slough of Despond!" Pilar sought to mock his mournful tone.

"You've said it. Looks like we're in to stick unless we can manage to pull each other out. Help me get back my girl, and I'll help you get him. If you won't, I'll get her anyway, and he *vamoses*."

"You mean, you'll drive him off?"

"I mean, I'll get rid of him for keeps. Savvy? All the same, I'll not throw him hard if you sit into the game with me. Gerda is always rubbing your fur the wrong way. My guess is that this putting of her brand on your maverick has made you fighting mad. Be my little side-kick, and we'll

both win out."

The girl's eyes burned with resentment behind the fringe of their long lashes.

"How can you do it?"

"Easy as shooting. How about that well-known pride of Gerda's? All you need do is make her think he's still after you — that he's still wearing your colors — under his shirt, so to speak."

"All *I* need do? So I'm to pull your chestnuts out of the fire!"

"She'd savvy in a flash if I played the cards. All we'd get would be a laugh from both of them. Come on. Be a sport. Don told me she's willing I should stay in the Kay Kay. But unless she gives him up and takes me, there's not room enough for both of us between the mesa and the Rio Grande. He goes, or I go. I'm betting on myself to stay."

"But you'd let him alone — you'd be decent to him — if Gerda accepted you?"

"Yes. You can have him, and welcome — warranted all sound in wind and limb. I'm not aching to give him a red shirt unless I have to."

"That's a *bobo* lie, Mat Welsh. But it does not matter. If I have my way when I'm married, I'll live in another state from you and Gerda."

Welsh smiled sourly.

"Guess that will suit everybody all around. You best start off by letting him know that your pile stacks up sizably higher than Gerda's. That'll head him back your way."

"Don't tell me how to play my own hand, you fourflusher!"

The indignant outburst was met by Welsh with a grim smile.

"It's not a four-flush I've dealt you. If you don't win him from Gerda, I'll know you're capping for his game. In that case ——"

The big man broke off with a significant narrowing of his eyes. Pilar whitened. Her dread-stiffened lips faltered.

"Wh-what — do you — mean?"

He laughed harshly as he heaved himself up from the table.

"What d'you suppose, *chiquita señorita?* I take it, we're both out to win. I know I am — and I will. You have your chance to save your *campeador* some trouble."

"I — will try," murmured the girl.

Welsh nodded and left the room in hearty good humor.

About this time Keith, Gerda, and Tyrrel were eating their cold lunch twenty miles away, under the shade of a big cottonwood, at the farthest Kay Kay water-hole.

On farther to the south, opposite the end of the Chupadera Mesa, the Sierra Oscuro towered into the turquoise sky like a mass of purple-blue mist. But neither brother nor sister joined Tyrrel in his admiration of the beautiful "obscure" mountains. They were intent upon the vital question of grass and water.

Streams which during the rains would flow strong down their arroyos, had long since dried up in the drought months of spring and summer. Some of the pools scattered along their course still held good water. Others were no more than sloughs of greenish slime. Still others, like the general run of the channels, had gone bone dry. Wind-blown sand was filling the cracks of the caked mud in their bottoms.

Gerda spoke impatiently to Tyrrel.

"Forget the dream hills. Tell us what you think of our range."

"It looks better than I expected. Pretty closely grazed off along the streams. But the boys tell me there's still good grass out near your line fences. I judge you'll have enough water to skimp through, even if the rains hold off the full month that Mr. Keith expects."

"That's not the point," said Keith. "It is like that stam-

pede. We'll lose few head but much weight. Alkali scum and a long range-out for grass don't put much beef on feeders."

"They'll pick up fast when conditions get better," predicted Tyrrel. "Mixed stuff is a guess. But you always can count on Her'fords, give 'em half a chance."

"What if they do not get that?"

"Why, then, if your bank balance or your bankers will let you carry them, hold over, on the gamble that this present demand for light beef will shift to a market for two-year-olds."

"You've said it, Dick!" cried Gerda. "No playing safe. We'll gamble for high stakes."

Her brother stood up, with that queer pinched look about his nostrils.

"I see another split in the partnership. Mat is already as good as pushed out. Now you set the opinion of a — a floating broncho buster against my judgment. Do you imagine I will stand for that?"

"If Mat elects to pull out, I'll not weep, Donnie. Dick is as good a cowman, or better. We'll make him foreman. He ran a big cattle outfit up in Colorado."

"Ran it into the ground," snapped Keith. "Successful managers of big outfits are not apt to quit their jobs to become professional rodeo riders."

Before Gerda could find words for her anger, the wrathful little man swung up on his horse.

"Here's where we part," he called over his shoulder, and he spurred his horse into a lope.

Gerda started after him, her anger chilling into perplexity and distress.

"What can have come over him? It's not at all like Donnie to fly off the handle."

"All my fault, no doubt," said Tyrrel. "Welsh of course has set him against me. I made it worse with my fool blatter

last night when he asked for references. But how could I talk sense when my peerless *peri* had just put her hand in mine and lifted me up into paradise — into the seventh heaven? Your brother should have known I was half delirious."

"He wouldn't understand it, Dick, even if we told him. He's too cautious. He's always trying so hard never to give way to any emotion — always that 'play safe — play safe.' Thanks be, I'm not like that!"

She clamped her arm about Tyrrel's throat and pulled him over backwards to plant a resounding kiss on his up-tilted chin.

"There! That's Gerda Keith for you. Play safe? *Bah!* I'm going to shove you in as foreman. If Donnie and Mat don't like it, they can lump it. Only thing, you must get another gun. Mat may try to be ornery."

Tyrrel gazed off dreamily at the violet haze of the Oscuro.

"I'm not so sure I want the job, Glory Girl."

"You — what?" Sparks of scorn began to flick in the amazed gray-green eyes. "You'd — quit — cold!"

"If Welsh sticks, he would have the right to boss me. Do you want the man you are going to marry to take orders from Mat Welsh?"

"No. I'll take back what I said about his staying in the Kay Kay. He sha'n't have his choice. I'll put him out and bring you in."

"Thanks, no — not even the foremanship, unless your brother asks me. No use hitching up a team that won't pull together. Look at your present partnership mixup."

Gerda sprang to her feet, tense with determination.

"You've said it, Dick! You heard Donnie — 'Here's where we part.' All right. We'll part with him and Mat Welsh for keeps. I'll take my third, and you and I'll buy a brand of our own."

With a lithe flexing of his long body, Tyrrel brought himself upright. He laid a quieting hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Let's think it over, Glory Girl. I have less than three thousand. The partnership would be too lopsided. The brand would have to be all in my wife's name."

"What's mine will be yours, Dick."

"Not by a little bit! I'm going to marry you — not your money. We'll wait and think about it. I've no hankering to hire out as my wife's foreman. I've already given you my opinion. Woman should be boss indoors; man outdoors."

The girl's shoulder wrenched free from Tyrrel's hand. Her head went up. Her eyes flashed.

"You're starting in rather early, Mr. Tyrrel. Just as well, though. We'll settle the point for good, right here and now. I shall be equal partner and equal boss on our range."

"If that doesn't mean my equal boss bossing her equal, I'm willing to think it over. Only thing, equal partnership implies an equal investment in the business — or at least one not so altogether lopsided. While you're pulling out of the Kay Kay, I might go off and try to dig up a bigger stake."

"How? There are no more riding contests on now, and not one chance in a hundred of your picking up another cattle option. You know you wouldn't have a ghost of a show in a gambling hall. As for me waiting till I'm gray-headed, while you save up wages — thank you, no! I didn't take you for a play-safer. If I'm mistaken, we'll call it off."

The issue had risen sooner than Tyrrel had expected. Gerda was running true to form. But her beauty gripped him even when her eyes glinted hard and cold and her red lips curled with derision. He had gentled many bronchos and even some outlaws. Those who would not be gentled he had broken.

"It will take half a month or more for you to wind up with the Kay Kay, Gerda. That will give me time to make

my gamble."

"As how?"

Tyrrel's eyes twinkled.

"Remember that treasure Pilar told about, up at the dead pueblo?"

"We're not joking. I'm telling you ——"

"Yes, but think of all that mint — that big limestone cave chuck full of Aztec idols — solid gold godlets — and the emeralds! Just suppose it's only a little bit true. I'd like mighty well to pick up a ring with one of those big green stones, to go with your necklace and your eyes, Glory Girl."

The glinting eyes softened, only to flash again with emerald fire.

"I tell you, this is no joke!"

"You've said it," agreed Tyrrel, his lean jaw suddenly hard-set. "I don't propose to hang round the Kay Kay waiting for a handout from you. I'm going up there to look for treasure."

Gerda flared with scorn.

"You'd make yourself the laughing stock of all the state! That hoary old treasure lie has been dragged out of its hole long ago. It's as dead and dried up as the pueblo itself."

"Maybe I can raise a few posies on its grave. Nothing like trying. Who is it has been jeering at play-safers?"

"But an utterly *loco* wild-goose chase like that!"

"Oh, I'm not so sure. There's pretty good evidence that some kind of treasure is, or used to be, at or near the place. For another thing, I've no relish to loaf in the none too genial company of your brother and Welsh."

"Well, I can't blame you for that, long as we're going to pull out of the Kay Kay. Take a *pasear* to Socorro or Albuquerque and look round for a good brand that's for sale. I'll not have you getting yourself laughed at over that stale Aztec hoax. If you do, we break off."

"I'll think about it," said Tyrrel. "Stop and think yourself. Do you want a side-partner who crawls to you?"

The question brought the girl up short. She could not say yes. Yet she would not give ground an inch. Unable to find a ready retort, she flung herself upon Lobo and dug in her spurs. Tyrrel took his time in mounting. He followed her at a jog.

He had put the whole matter of their relationship, present and future, into that question. Let her think it over. The treasure hunt was only a counter for the real issue between them. If she wanted a life partner on equal terms, well and good. But if she would not meet him half way — if she was bent upon rule or ruin — then the sooner he woke up from his dream of happiness the better. He would gladly give his hand or his life for love of her. But he would not give his manhood.

CHAPTER XXI

INNUENDO

GERDA missed her brother by cutting straight across country, regardless of the lay of the land. She ran Lobo all the way to the ranch.

Work had been found for Redeye and Butch. But Slim was loafing away the afternoon in the cool darkness of the stable. Dazzled from the fierce sun glare outside, Gerda made out only the vague form of a man in the gloom. She swung open the lower half of the door and, with a slap of her hat, sent the hard-ridden thoroughbred lunging in towards his box stall.

"Give him a good rub down," she ordered in a tone that galvanized Slim out of his slouch.

Fortunately for him, he was an expert wrangler. Gerda had passed on her exasperation and temper to the roan. Slim found himself in for a lively time, dodging Lobo's teeth and hoofs. One kick grazed his leg.

Cursing virulently, he limped out and around to the shady end of the stable, where he knew that old Jake was plaiting a horsehair bridle. He could see no sign of Ante or of Keith's horse in the corral or near the *casa*. His snaky eyes glittered. The girl had ridden in alone and she had been as mad as a wet hen.

"Get a move on you, gran'dad," he said. "Miss Keith just turned in that crazy wolf horse. Wants he should be rubbed down."

As Jake went in to gentle the outraged thoroughbred, Slim clapped his saddle on a horse and streaked out for the nearest water-hole. Welsh was supervising repairs on the sluiceways

of the almost dry reservoir. He listened to Slim's report with a show of indifference and promptly set the tale-bearer to work.

An hour before sundown he saw a lone rider jog up the creek from the south. Even at that distance Keith's enormous sombrero was unmistakable. Welsh leisurely mounted and rode in to the *casa*. He found Keith in the office, intently studying the terms of their partnership agreement. He sang out in a tone of bluff friendliness.

"Well, Don, you're back, I see. Out all day fixing up the new deal with Gerda and Tyrrel. All ready now to fire me, I take it. Well, I don't blame *you*, old-timer. It's Gerda, of course. If she don't want me, I don't want to stay in. Only came in, in the first place, because I wanted her."

Keith tapped his pencil nervously on the desk top.

"We want a good deal, Mat, that we never get in this world. I myself — but that has nothing to do with this business. Here is the situation. The Kay Kay cannot buy out two of you at the same time. One of you will have to stick on for a while. But I can't stand to be run by Gerda and Tyrrel together. Either she goes or I go."

The sharply spoken declaration gave Welsh a shaft of light in the darkness. Here was the explanation of Gerda's return alone and in a rage. No, not a full explanation. It did not account for the fact that Tyrrel had come back with neither of them. His absence would seem to indicate that the girl had first quarreled with her brother and then with her *fiancé*.

Welsh replied gravely, with no sign of his inward whirl of exultance.

"I'll side you, long as you want me to, Don; only I'll not vote to put Gerda out. That's between you two. I've nothing against her. It's all that sneak of a buster. If only we could get rid of him. No use, though, me talking. Minute

I tried to put you wise on the fellow, you went all up in the air."

"My mistake, Mat!" Keith dropped the partnership agreement and mopped his head. "I'm ready to listen, this time."

"But I'm not ready to talk. I'm wised now myself. The fellow who blabs is usually left holding the sack. I'd sooner lose Gerda for keeps than have her get the notion I'm a scandal-monger."

Keith's face turned sallow gray.

"You've said too much to stop there. Go on."

"No, I won't — not even for you, Don. If the fellow took liberties with the little girl . . . . only you oughtn't to blame *her*. It's on him. She's still so young. She didn't know enough to stop him before he —" Welsh hesitated — "Well, before he went too far. That's all I'm going to say."

"When did this happen?"

"I've said too much already, Don. Gerda will never forgive me if you let her know I told on her slick Dick. If you want the details, you'll have to get Pilar to talk. I'm out of it."

He swung around and walked heavily from the office. Keith did not call after him. He sat very still. The minute hand of the office clock crept all the way around its face. One of the housemaids came to announce dinner. Keith told her very quietly that he had business matters to arrange and wished the others to excuse his absence from the table.

After that no one disturbed him. When darkness came he lighted the desk lamp. But he made no move to go over the Kay Kay ledgers or papers. He sat far into the night staring at the top of his neat, orderly desk.

Dinner had been a dreary meal, with Welsh silent and glum, and Gerda silent and haughty. Even Pilar gave over her show of sprightliness when the maid brought Keith's excuses.

There was no one to welcome her smiles.

Late as Tyrrel had returned to the ranch, he had found no invitation waiting for him. By no means surprised, though somewhat disappointed, he sat down to supper with the other hands. Cookie's meals were as savory as they were unesthetic. Hard as Slim and Redeye tried to "scratch" the dude broncho buster who had been "throwed" by the bosses, Tyrrel only smiled and called for a second helping of *chili con carne.*

Towards the end of the meal Butch became enraged over the failure of his buddies to get a rise out of the Coloradoan. He made a coarse allusion to Pilar. Before the slur had all left his mouth, Tyrrel's hot prune dumpling squashed on his hoggish nose.

For a moment Slim's hand dropped below the level of the table. But Redeye joined in the howl of mirth that greeted the spluttering Butch. Slim's hand came up empty. His move passed unnoticed by Tyrrel, who, plate in hand, was waiting for Butch to draw.

Gailor yelled for Cookie to fetch a can of lie and scrub out Butch's mouth. The suggestion met with a whoop of approval from the other old Kay Kay men. Instead of drawing to shoot Tyrrel, Butch slunk out of the mess room with his hand nursing his scalded nose.

At the end of the meal lame little old Jake stumbled against Tyrrel and pushed him to one side, so that Slim and Redeye passed through the doorway ahead of them.

"Best keep your eye peeled, kid," he warned. "Them hardboiled birds wouldn't mind a little bit doing you dirt."

"Not round the ranch," said Tyrrel. "Everybody knows I lost my gun. My best defense while I'm here is not being heeled. They couldn't claim self-defense. They haven't nerve enough to gamble against the chance of being strung up."

"You ain't a-going to fight 'em?"

"Not if I can help it, Jake."

"*Hough!* Didn't take you for the kind to lay down to a pack of dirty hounds like them."

"I aim to keep on my feet, dad. But you wouldn't like a fracas round the house, would you? Ladies object to musses."

He left the old wrangler shaking his head, and went to turn in for the night. The three gunmen had started a poker game in the corner of the bunk room. He ignored their invitation for him to sit in with them. The time had come for him to think.

If Gerda should not send for him before the next noon, it would be his move. The move must be away from the Kay Kay. In any event, he must leave, with or without Gerda's approval. The only turn in the situation that would permit him to stay would be if she should make up with her brother and win her way with him. Let him get rid of Welsh and ask her *fiancé* to remain—in that case the treasure search could wait a while.

But breakfast came and passed without a word or sign from Gerda. He packed his bed-roll, bought a large canteen, and went out to give Ante a good feed of oats.

At the breakfast table Keith had sat very quiet. He looked as if he had not slept well. But he showed no emotion. Gerda took his slight frown and abstracted manner as no more than signs of worry over arranging the break-up of the partnership. She said nothing. Her quarrel with Tyrrel had put her in a hole. She could not make up her mind which way to climb out. Love pulled her towards his side. Pride pushed her back.

Welsh had little more to say. He sat glum and grim except now and then when he eyed Pilar with glances of fatherly pity.

The young girl paid as little heed to him as to Gerda. Keith had looked at her only once since he came in, and then it had been merely to murmur a vague "Good morning,

niña." She was trying her best to believe herself in a tragic mood. When not looking down at her plate she fixed her black eyes upon him in a somber sidelong stare.

Behind the mask of his seeming abstraction he studied the girl's every glance and turn and expression. He had brooded all night. Well as he knew her love of pretense — of artless play-acting and half earnest melodrama — he was in no mood to sift truth from fancy. His mind was poisoned. Welsh had done a thorough job.

As they rose from the table Welsh gave her a keen look behind the backs of the others. She murmured pensively to her guardian:

"May I speak to you about my property, Don *Señor?*"

Still with that air of abstraction, he led her to the office.

"Now, *niña*, what is it you wish to know?"

"I want my money — I want to go away."

"Why?"

"Because."

Keith set his teeth and forced his voice to keep to the same low, quiet tone.

"Has it anything to do with that — man — Tyrrel?"

She gave him a startled glance whose fright was not altogether make-believe.

"I — I don't have to tell. I won't tell!"

No more was needed to clinch Keith's belief that the worst was true. He could not bear to hurt her with probing questions.

"Very well, *niña*," he said. "I will see what I can do, and will let you know as soon as possible."

She left the office, puzzled and pouting. Welsh was waiting for her around the corner of the dark cross-corridor. He gripped her arm.

"What's the word?" he demanded.

Her scarlet lips twisted in a mocking smile.

"Dough! He's as full of fire as a batch of batter!"

With a petulant jerk, she freed her arm and flounced up the nearest stairway. Welsh swung around the corner into the main corridor — only to step back again.

Keith was coming from the office. He walked rapidly. As he swung past the cross-corridor Welsh saw his face. It startled him. Then he smiled with grim satisfaction. He waited until his partner was out of sight before following.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MILKSOP

KEITH did not pause until he reached the outer court. Tyrrel had gone to feed Ante. Only Slim lingered in the men's quarters, under pretense of mending an old saddle. Keith gave him a sharp order to find Tyrrel and send him to the *patio* garden.

Slim delivered the order, and tagged Tyrrel back to the *casa*. He had seen smouldering fire behind the glasses of the little boss. From the shadow of the great gateway he watched Tyrrel pass through the entrance of the garden. Welsh came from the nearest doorway of the *casa* wing and beckoned to him.

Inside the smaller gateway Tyrrel found Keith waiting before a group of trees and bushes that masked them from the main building. Keith had been puffing hard at one of his fine Havanas. At sight of Tyrrel he stood suddenly rigid, with his teeth clenched on the cigar.

"Good morning," said Tyrrel. "I understand you sent for me."

The crunched cigar dropped from Keith's colorless lips. He spat out the stub and snapped a question:

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No. Why?"

"Too bad. A dispensation takes time. I will permit no delay. It must be a civil marriage."

Tyrrel's heart pounded against his ribs.

"A civil . . . . of course! If that suits her. Anything that suits her!"

Keith's mask of calmness vanished in the flare of his white

fury.

"You skunk! Glad to have the chance, are you? Think it will save you?"

"Save me?" Tyrrel gasped. Had the once genial little man gone stark, raving mad?

With a great effort Keith got a half grip on his passion. He must control himself. He must fight down his furious impulse to leap on the fellow and tear at his throat. The good name of Pilar must first be made safe. After that——

"Don't think you can dupe me with your sham acting! You'll marry her. Then you'll hit out *pronto*—if you don't want to fill a six-foot homestead."

Madder and madder! Tyrrel tried soothing words.

"Why, of course I'll marry her, Mr. Keith. As for our leaving, if she agrees to a real fifty-fifty arrangement——"

"So that's why she asked for her property? You slick Dick! You shall never get your greedy fingers on a dollar of her money, and you'll clear out alone. I am trustee of her estate as well as her guardian."

Again Tyrrel looked his astonishment.

"You, her guardian? But she's of age."

"Seventeen."

"Impossible! She told me herself she's twenty-two. You're stark crazy!"

"We'll see about that. With my consent, you can get a license to marry her. But you cannot touch her money. It stays in my hands as trustee. Though a sheepman, Chavez was no fool. He knew her romantic artlessness would lay her wide open to the attack of sneaking coyotes—like you!"

The truth flashed through the fog of Tyrrel's bewilderment.

"Guess we're pulling crosswise, Mr. Keith. I thought you were talking about Gerda."

"Gerda? Don't lie to me! I know what you've done to

Pilar! She confessed it."

"No?"

"Same thing. I put it to her, and she would not deny it."

"Because there was nothing to deny. The little girl likes to coquet. We flirted a little for fun. It went no further. I'd as soon harm my little sister, if I had one."

"Don't try to wriggle out of it! You are going to marry her at once."

"No, I'm not. What's more——"

"You refuse to marry her?"

"Yes. I wouldn't marry her now, not even if she herself——"

Keith gasped as if choking. He snatched a pistol from under his left armpit.

Tyrrel's fist shot out. It jarred upon the point of Keith's chin. Keith went down as if struck by a thunderbolt. He lay flaccid, stunned. The blow had completely knocked him out.

Remembrance of what he had heard about the fallen man's sunstroke stirred Tyrrel to quick action. It would not do to let him lie in the sun. Water and shade were both needed. The fountain tinkled only a few yards away.

As he started to lift the unconscious man, the bull voice of Welsh bellowed in the gateway:

"Get him, Slim! He's murdering—hold on! Wait!"

Tyrrel had whirled sideways and straightened erect, with the limp body of Keith held up before him. From under one of the arms he thrust out Keith's small pistol.

"Drop your guns," he ordered.

Slim's hands were already going up, empty. Welsh hesitated only the fraction of a second. He was too far inside the gate to jump back to cover. To see the man he had thought unarmed, not only pistol in hand, but shielded behind the body of his partner, disconcerted him. He dropped his

big pistol and put up his hands.

"That's wise," said Tyrrel. "Now sidle round to your left. Step lively, please. I want to get Mr. Keith to the fountain."

The two hastened to obey. Tyrrel followed them towards the fountain. He had still half a dozen steps to go when Gerda dashed from the veranda. She saw the drooping body in Tyrrel's arms.

"Donnie!" she cried. "Dead!"

Before her rush brought her to them, Tyrrel had laid his burden down in the nearest shade and scooped a hatful of water from the fountain. She flung herself on her knees beside her brother to feel his heart.

"Only knocked out," said Tyrrel. "Douse of water — he'll soon be all right."

He began to fleck water into Keith's ghastly face. Gerda detected a faint heartbeat. Her fright flared into anger. She stared accusingly at Welsh and Slim. The gunman still had his hands half up.

"Who did this? What's that fellow doing in here?"

"We happened to be near the gate," answered Welsh. "Heard Tyrrel quarreling with Don about — about Pilar. We ran in just in time to see him jump Don. He knocked him down and took his pistol. Looked like he meant to murder him."

"Dick? Kill Donnie!"

The girl glared at Tyrrel in an agony of bewilderment and horror. His jaw set as hard as Welsh's.

"So that's how much your love amounts to!" he thrust at her.

Goaded by the reproach, she struck back hard.

"It's true! Donnie's pistol still in your hand! You've beaten him insensible!"

"One tap on the chin when he drew on me."

"*Bah!* Donnie never drew on anyone in all his life. If he drew on you, it was to keep you from beating him up — you prizefight bully! If you didn't do it, why are you hanging onto his pistol?"

Tyrrel shoved the hilt of the pistol into her outflung hand and dumped the water from his hat.

"Ask him when he wakes up. His lie is still worse. I'm through."

"Hold on!" roared Welsh. "You don't slink off so easy. Don can't tell her what you did when you beat him senseless."

The taunt brought Tyrrel back around on his heel.

"I called the bluff of a pair of fourflushers — no-no, Slim! As you were! Both of you keep to that side of the fountain. I'm two jumps nearer those guns."

"Stand still yourself!" ordered Gerda.

She leveled her brother's pistol at him in a hand that did not quiver. He smiled into her glittering eyes.

"Look out, lady. That thing may go off."

"*It* may, but *you'll* not till I tell you to. Now, Mat, we're listening."

"It's only a little bit of his skunk play, Gerda. I own up he fooled Slim and me when we thought we had him covered. We had the drop on him but couldn't shoot."

"Why?"

"Simply and solely because we'd have had to shoot through Don. Slick Dick hid behind him — held him up, all stunned and helpless, to stop our bullets and save his own hide."

Tyrrel's eyes widened.

"Good Lord! Didn't think of that! I had him more than half lifted when you yelled for Slim to shoot. Couldn't drop him or stop to lay him down."

"Pretty thin," sneered Slim. "You had the little boss up by the throat, trying to beat out his brains with your pistol butt."

"That's an open-faced lie."

Keith's eyelids had fluttered and lifted. He stirred under Gerda's hand. Without taking her scornful gaze from Tyrrel, she stood up and pointed towards the gate.

"Enough! Either you skulked behind my brother after trying to murder him, or else Mat and Slim tried to murder you, and you lacked nerve to shoot them. I haven't any use for a milk-sop."

Even had not Tyrrel seen that she was beyond reach of reason or appeal, he could have said no more. He had reached his limit. A downward look showed him that Keith was reviving. He faced about and walked off without a backward glance.

At the gate he picked up and uncocked the pistols of Welsh and Slim. He turned both in to Cookie when he asked that fat bean-boiler to fill his canteen and stow two days' rations in his saddle-bags.

He brought Ante into the outer courtyard and slung the filled canteen and the bags on his saddle. As he added his bed-roll to the pack, Pilar came running from the inner *patio*. Checked by the curious stare of Cookie, she stopped a full arm's length away from Tyrrel and held out a pink-ribboned bundle.

"*Santisima!*" she panted. "For them to drive you off this way!"

He forced a smile.

"You're a dear! Don't lose any sleep over me. It's not the first time I've taken a spill. Maybe I'll get the laugh on them."

"How?"

"What if I should slant over to Tabru and dig up that treasure?"

"Ah! ah! *Poder de Dios!* You will find it — all the gold and emeralds and rubies!"

"Well, to tell the honest truth, I'm not banking strong on your Aztec hoard, little girl. I'll be satisfied if I find something more precious."

"More precious? Diamonds!"

"We might call it that. Sounds alliterative if not literal — dewy diamonds dug from the dusty desert! What's the package?"

Pilar shot a sidelong glance at the open-eyed, open-eared cook.

"It's a lunch for your trip — nut fudge and cake and ——"

"But Cookie has filled my saddle-bags."

"My own fudge! You *must* take it." This time her black eyes stared straight at the cook. "Look how that fat burro wiggles his big ears."

Cookie backed away, covered with confusion and a brick-red blush. The girl came close to Tyrrel.

"It is mine to give. It was my *padre's*. You lost your own. When they — Mat and Slim — helped Don into the *sala*, Gerda ordered the snake to *vamos*. I saw the way they looked at each other behind her back. Accept my gift. You will need it."

Tyrrel took the out-thrust package.

"O me, O my! It feels like a pound cake — a two-pound cake."

"More than that," Pilar flashed back at him. "It's heavy. Cookie will tell you how they're apt to fall if you don't watch out."

"I gather, my cake will be dough if I don't take it," countered Tyrrel as he crammed the package into one of the saddlebags. He turned to grip the girl's little hands between his ungloved palms.

"Good-bye, *Señorita* Elberta. I'll not forget this. If I find the treasure, you shall have a peach of a stone."

He mounted. She made the sign of the cross.

"*Vaya usted con Dios, mi querido amigo!*"

"I agree. But what does it mean?"

"Go with God, beloved friend."

"Same to you, little girl — and many happy returns!"

A touch of the reins sent Ante swinging around towards the main gateway. As he bore his erect rider under the great stone arch, Gerda appeared at the inner gate. She gazed intently across the court. Pilar was fluttering her lace-edged handkerchief. Tyrrel waved back to her.

Gerda turned about and walked quickly across the garden. She carried her head high. But her eyes no longer flashed with scorn.

He had left her and gone away without a word.

CHAPTER XXIII

'TIS AN ILL WIND —

EASTWARD, beyond sight from the ranch, Tyrrel opened Pilar's package of lunch. The fudge was an old-fashioned cartridge belt of carved Spanish leather, embossed with silver. The nuts that enriched it were lead-bullet cartridges whose brass was green with age. The cake was a long-barreled Colts, gorgeous with mountings of pearl and gold.

He spun the cylinder, loaded it, and put two bullets through the center of a prickly-pear leaf-lobe fifty feet away.

"Old model double-action gun, Ante horse. Puts 'em where you aim. We're in luck."

He looked close at the rich mountings.

"Just what you'd expect of a Spanish don. Let's have a guess at the fancy monogram — 'CM' . . . . no, 'MC' — Miguel Chavez. All gold and pearl — and three crosses scratched on the heel plate! Some man for a sheep prince! No wonder he roped young Miss Keith — and less wonder that *Señorita* Pilar floats about in a rose-cloud of romance. Ante horse, Ante horse, if only somebody else we know had a tenth of that little girl's tenderness, we'd be eating oats in a box stall!"

Ante broke into a jog.

Sunset found them high among the piñons. Instead of back-trailing the route of the herd, Tyrrel had headed straight east from the ranch, across to the cedar-dotted wall of the great mesa.

All the immense "table" top seemed deserted of bird, beast, and man. But as horse and rider rounded a rise, a piñon-jay screeched warning of their approach. Over the rise a squirrel

irascibly scolded them from a tree top. The clamor of bird and squirrel started a chain of ideas in Tyrrel's mind that broke in upon his bitter reverie.

He loped Ante downhill and up the next rise. Behind the crest rocks he dismounted and sat down on a ledge to peer back through a narrow crevice. A long five minutes passed with no sight of any living creature, and no slightest sound to break the stillness of the mountain sunset. He rose to remount.

"Just another bit of the little girl's romance, Ante. With nightfall near, he would have closed up——"

From the other ridge came the harsh far-carrying cry of the jay. Tyrrel jumped back to his peep-hole. The distance was too great for him to hear the chatter of the squirrel. But the red after-glare of sundown still glowed bright through the trees on the skyline. Between the black trunks he saw the head and shoulders of a rider come part way up the round of the ridge. The figure rose no higher.

"Stopped to take a look ahead. We can't shoot on suspicion, Ante horse. Yet if he is who he is, he'll make his try from behind a tree—in the dark. How about testing his intentions with that old stunt Dad Howbert told about?"

Ante jogged on into the twilight. As dusk came stealing under the pines he topped another crested ridge. Tyrrel galloped him a quarter-mile down the far slope, and jumped off to build a high-stacked cook fire. While his bacon sizzled on a green pine twig, he jerked off his saddle behind a clump of young growth, a few feet to one side of the fire. His unpacked bed-roll, stuffed with pine sprays and the saddle-bags, and topped with his hat in the saddle, looked startlingly like a sleeping man even from close at hand.

The cook spit had burned through and dropped the bacon into the fire. Tyrrel stacked the fire with larger pieces and slipped away among the pines, carrying his canteen and a

fistful of cold biscuits. Ante started to tag after him, but stopped at his order and began to crop the dry bunch-grass.

Tyrrel soon finished his scant meal, the first he had eaten since breakfast. He drank his fill from the canteen and stretched out at ease in the shadow of the pine under which he had posted himself.

Night had already settled down upon the mesa top. The starlight between the trees was too faint to outline objects against the dense blackness of their shadows. By contrast, everything within several yards of the fire stood out clear and distinct.

The wait was much longer than Tyrrel had expected. The slow minutes dragged past the hour mark and on into the second hour. As the fire burned down into a bed of glowing coals, the circle of red light narrowed.

No slightest sound reached Tyrrel's straining ears. But Ante stopped his grazing and looked off into the blackness, across the fire from the sham sleeper. Tyrrel peered hard in the same direction. After a time Ante dropped his big head to crop another mouthful of grass. He did not point again.

The delay was getting on Tyrrel's nerves. He began to doubt his own eyes. What if the piñon-jay had screeched at only a passing mule deer? The supposed rider may have been no more than a bush or a young pine. A wildcat, or even a rabbit, could have made Ante stand and gaze.

With a suddenness that almost jerked a cry from Tyrrel, a shadow glided from under one of the trees on the right of the fire. It slunk into line between him and the glowing coals. That excessively thin, tall figure could not be mistaken. Tyrrel stood up and felt his way forward, step by step.

Slim paused, as far from the fire on one side as the sham sleeper lay on the other.

"Hey, you—" he mouthed a vile name—"wake up. I want you should see it coming! You—" more vile names.

The sleeper did not stir. Slim burst into blasphemy and fired at what would have been Tyrrel's legs. Still the sleeper did not stir. A frightful doubt clutched the heart of the assassin. He fired two quick shots into the thick of the bed-roll.

From behind him came a quiet voice.

"Hands up."

Already rattled, Slim whirled and fired towards the sound, instead of jumping for cover. Tyrrel's first bullet struck him high up under the right collarbone. The pistol fell from his down-dropping hand. He yelled and jumped towards the nearest tree. The second shot from the old Colts struck his leg. He sprawled headlong and lay outstretched, howling for mercy.

Tyrrel called from the blackness.

"Can that racket. You're not killed. Sit up. Now, give it me straight, if you want to live. Where's Butch and Red-eye?"

"B-b-back on the Ka-K-Kay Kay. D-d-don't shoot, buddy! I'll cough up. It was Big Mat made me——"

"Straight, I said. If they're here, I'll finish you, sure as——"

"N-n-no, buddy! Nix! They ain't siding me — she didn't fire only me. I trailed you all by my lonesome. Mat swore you wasn't heeled. He gave me a hundred bucks."

"Only a hundred? Less than the price of a good horse. He values us both pretty cheap."

Slim groaned and clutched at his shoulder and leg. Both wounds were beginning to tune up. The groan decided Tyrrel. He ran forward to pick up the fallen pistol and fling an armful of dry twigs on the fire.

The upblaze gave him clear light to examine Slim's wounds. Each bullet had gone clean through. The leg wound was only in the muscles of the calf. He sterilized it with hot ashes and

put on a bandage torn from a blanket. The same rough surgery stanched the more serious wound under the collar-bone.

When he fetched the other horse from the crest of the ridge and started to saddle up Ante, Slim begged abjectly to be let go.

"No use whining," said Tyrrel. "You're not going to set Welsh and your brother coyotes on me for a while at least. Besides, you'll travel easier at night, before your fever gets up."

"D'you figger on jailing me?"

"I'll ask Mr. Howbert's advice."

Slim's pain-twisted jaw dropped.

"Old Hack How? He'll skin me alive! My dad sided One-Gun."

"Strikes me, I'm the man who's entitled to hang your hide on the fence. Come along."

The cowed man made no struggle to hold back from being boosted into his saddle. Tyrrel took the horse in lead. He permitted his prisoner no chance to slip away in the darkness. An occasional glimpse of the North Star enabled him to keep Ante headed in an easterly direction until the moon gave light enough to quicken the pace. A lope was easier on Slim than a jog-trot. When the ground was not too rough or steep they covered fast mileage.

No stop was made until mid-morning of the next day, when they were far out on the plains east of the Chupadera. Tyrrel lifted down his exhausted prisoner and laid him in the shade of a mesquite. Though feverish, Slim took more than his share of bacon and biscuits.

He drowsed through the heat of the day. Towards evening Tyrrel helped him back into his saddle. They veered a little south of east, crossed the railroad north of Coyote, and struck for the gap between Jack's Peak and the Jacarilla

Mountains.

After dark they sighted the light of a ranch house. But Tyrrel rode on, despite Slim's groans. He had no wish to chance stumbling upon friends of his prisoner.

Daybreak brought them to the ranch house of the Lazy S Bar. Howbert was eating breakfast with his men when Tyrrel staggered in at the door with the swooning Slim across his shoulder.

"Howdy, son. You're just in time," he greeted, as unconcernedly as if the visitor were one of the hands who had overslept. "Set up and feed your face. Who's your sick pard? By ginger, it's Slim Rixerlie! Give him an ease-down, Billy Bull."

Tyrrel dumped his burden into the arms of the battered-faced, red-headed old foreman who sprang to help him.

"I'll ask you to bunk and coffee him, Billy. He ran into a couple of bullets, up on the Chupadera, night before last."

A puncher followed the foreman to the bunk room with the coffee-pot. As Tyrrel dropped into one of the vacant places on the bench, the old cowman shoved him his own freshly refilled cup of coffee. It was almost as strong as lye and little less than scalding hot.

Tyrrell drained the cup in one draught and fell to on the Mexican cook's peppery dishes. Between swallows he gave a laconic account of the stampede and his encounters with Welsh and Slim.

At the end of the meal Howbert sent his men off to work and went to look at Slim.

"Sleeping like a log," he reported. "Could take a wink or two your ownself, *huh?*"

"Not till we've had a powwow. First, about Slim."

"You scotched the snake mighty neat. But you ought to've smashed his head. He'll live to wriggle out of the penitentiary and get you."

"No. Here's how I've thought it out. I had no witnesses. If I had killed him, the Kay Kay would have had me tried for murder in their own county. That would have cost me time and money, not to mention risk of pen or the noose."

"Best have chanced it. Them Rixerlies never give up trying to get even. We'll do our best, though, to send him up for life."

"Only my word against his, and he a native son. No. My idea is to turn him loose. I've sized him up. If he ever had nerve, it's broken. He has had his lesson. The others don't look for him back. The Kay Kay has fired him. He'll run home and stay home."

Howbert meditatively gnawed his tobacco plug and spat through the doorway.

"Dunno but what mebbe you're right, son. 'Tain't the way we used to settle argyments, but——"

"But you had your Lincoln County wars! Peace is getting to be more popular. It's more fun building up than tearing down."

The old man's eyes glinted.

"You've come to throw in with the Lazy S Bar!"

"To offer you a partnership, if my proposition pans out. I'm on my way to hunt the treasure of Tabru."

"*Huh?* You're plumb locoed. Who's been stuffing you with that bull con?"

"Pretty good grass there."

"Tiptop—and nary a drop of cow drink."

"What will you make it if I supply the water?"

The look in the ruddy brown eyes checked the cowman's sardonic reply. He bushed down his shaggy eyebrows

"How'd half the calves strike you?"

"I'm thinking of feeders."

"*Um-m*—that Kay Kay deal didn't clean me on 'em—not by a little bit. Fact is, 'twasn't only for the cash that I had

to get rid of that there bunch. My range is pretty much et off."

"So I noticed. Cows can pull through on short grass. Feeders in that knee-high grama at Tabru would lay on weight fast — marbled beef. They'd bring top market."

"By ginger, you've cut your eye-teeth, son, or I'm a greaser. What's your proposition?"

"Half the calves, a fifth on the feeders, and a right to buy into the Lazy S Bar — always supposing I find that water."

Howbert clapped him on the knee.

"Go to it, son! I wouldn't mind hearing tell what's up your sleeve, if 'tain't no secret."

"Not to you. It's a gamble but not altogether wildcat. Miss Keith spoke of how the Pueblos used to kill their springs. When we drove across the dead town, part of the herd bunched in a rocky draw, off to the south. Before heading down this way I had sided some irrigation engineers. They posted me on drainage and watertables and all that. The draw at the pueblo looked like a good bet to me. Of course, though, it may be only a small spring."

"It's worth a try, son. If you don't make a go of it, back-trail to the Lazy S Bar. Reckon I know a comer when I see him. You're free to buy a slice in the brand right now."

"Thanks. But I'll wait. I'd like to chip in some blue ones."

A yawn threatened to throw Tyrrel's jaw out of joint. He stumbled into the bunk room and stretched out on a bed, across from the snoring Slim.

The wounded man slept until evening, drank a big bowl of soup, and drowsed off again. In the morning he was wakened by Tyrrel and Howbert.

"Coil, you rattlesnake," ordered the cowman. "Wriggle 'longside the bar of justice. Get your hoof up on the rail and sing out what'll you have. Your judge gives you choice of the rope, or life in the state home for skunks, or turning

you loose. Don't sit there batting your eyes. Sit up and bark like a little man."

Slim glared sullenly at the grim mocker. Tyrrel eased him to a sitting position and placed his right arm in a sling.

"That takes the strain from your shoulder," he said. "Mr. Howbert will put you up till you feel like pulling out for home. Only condition, you're to keep away from Welsh."

The jaw of the wounded man gaped.

"You—you're joking!"

"I'm giving it you straight. Do you steer clear of Welsh?"

The snappy eyes glowed with a look that Tyrrel had never before seen in them. The slack jaw closed with a snap.

"To hell with Mat Welsh! You're a white man!"

"Free, white and American," said Tyrrel. "You're going to be the same from now on."

He took the man's limp left hand in a hearty grip. It tightened with sudden convulsive force.

"That's the stuff, buddy. Stick on, and don't pull leather. S'long, dad. Hope to see you inside a month."

The cowman grunted a casual responsive "S'long," and gnawed at his plug. But the moment Tyrrel went out, he thrust his cadaverous face close to Slim's.

"What you grinning at, you ornery coyote? Think he's soft, *huh?*"

"Soft—hell! I ain't grinning, Jacarilla. I'm just a-smiling—with *him.*"

Howbert left the bunk room, scratching his grizzled head. He peered out at the rider who had started to jog away through the cottonwoods. When Tyrrel disappeared, he got down his greasy old ledger, tore a leaf out of the back, and put on his battered spectacles.

"Best get it writ to once," he muttered. "May be lightning-struck, or my hoss put his foot in a prairie-pup hole. They's no telling what'll happen these here days."

CHAPTER XXIV

FOOL OR JOKER

FROM Gallinas Tyrrel followed the general course of the railroad around to the nearest section house north of the dead pueblo. On his way he collected a second-hand flivver truck, gasolene, food, a camp kit, and two water tanks.

At the section house he found waiting the dynamite and miners' tools for which he had wired ahead to Albuquerque. He left Ante in pasture, and struck out southward with the truck, ostensibly to prospect on the Chupadera.

Without even Ante for company, he found the gaunt ashen-gray ruins of the old pueblo more than ever arid and desolate and uncanny. He was far too intent upon his project, however, to give way to fanciful day-dreams over the dead dwellings of a dead tribe.

Work alone would numb the ache of his memory of Gerda Keith. He had lost her . . . . if by any possibility there was still a fighting chance to win her back, work and careful thinking might now give him that chance.

First of all, he must make sure that no one should surprise his secret and forestall him. He pitched his camp near a small outlying ruin, so situated that the bottom of the rocky draw would not be visible to anyone coming to the camp from the southwest or leaving it that way.

Nearby was an old slope-sided prospect hole of the treasure seekers. With a little pick and shovel work and a blast of dynamite, he gave the timberless shaft the appearance of having been newly dug. After planting a second charge of giant powder, he carried part of his tools across to the draw.

Nearly two hundred and fifty years had passed since

the extermination of the Pueblos by their ferocious Apache enemies. If any path had ever led from the houses to the draw, it had long since been obliterated by the carving and filling of wind-driven sand, by frost and rain, and by the growth of grass, junipers, and cactus.

But Tyrrel was not looking for relics of the old-time inhabitants. He spent hours studying the outcrop of the limestone and tracing the lay of its stratas. When he set to digging, it was at a point a few yards down the draw from what seemed to him the most favorable dip in the stratas.

A week of hard toil with pick, shovel, drills and dynamite brought him down through the age-old fill of dirt and broken limestone to solid bedrock. His narrow shaft was as bone dry at the bottom as at the top. The bedrock sloped with the pitch of the draw. Reason told him that he could not hope to find a drop of fluid up on the incline. Water runs down hill.

But he was now beyond reason. In his blood burned the fever of the treasure seeker. He shifted up the draw a dozen yards and started to sink a second shaft. There was logic in his madness. Farther down slope the bedrock cropped out in bare ledges. No possibility of water there. That was plain to the eye.

Up-slope, however, the disheartening dry stratas were covered over. He might as well use up his dynamite. There is always a chance that experience may prove valuable. Some day he might have to take a mining job. He pounded his drill with stubborn persistence.

From the first, his ten-minute rests every hour had been spent up behind the west rim of the draw, looking down across the valley towards the dark mass of the great mesa. Afternoon of the tenth day brought what he had been looking for yet had only faintly expected. He saw a group of riders down in the valley. The party numbered four, and they

were slanting across from the mesa foot to the south, towards the dead town.

By the time the riders came up the hill slope Tyrrel had covered his shafts with dust-sprinkled tarpaulins and was back at his camp. As the visitors topped the rise to the southwest he touched off the second blast in the old hole.

The riders were close at hand when he staggered up the incline with a sack of blast-shattered rock on his back. The sack thudded down beside him. He flung out his hands with well-acted astonishment.

"Hello! If it isn't the double Kay Kay! Four of a kind! Welcome to our city, ladies and gents!"

A touch of Gerda's spur sent Lobo curvetting and side-jumping around the pit. Keith and Pilar pushed ahead of the frowning Welsh.

"Oh, Mr. Tyrrel," cried the young girl, "haven't you found the treasure yet?"

Tyrrel wiped his forehead and looked at his blistered palms.

"Not yet, Miss Chavez. I haven't struck anything so far except some pieces of pottery."

"You are wasting your time," said Keith, in a not unfriendly tone. "We came because my ward insisted you really would attempt this preposterous search."

"Thanks for your interest! Perhaps you came to advise me to go and sit on the North Pole. It might be cooler there."

Keith slipped a handkerchief up under his half-raised hat.

"No. I came to offer an apology for my accusation against you. However indiscreet you may have been, my ward has convinced me I did not have sufficient cause for my attack."

"That's a perfectly good apology so far as it goes, Mr. Keith. I knocked you out because you drew on me. If you hadn't had a gun I wouldn't have done that. I would have

thrashed you for believing what you did about the lady."

"I deserved it, Tyrrel. For the first time in years I permitted my feelings to override my reason. It does not pay. You saw the consequences. With regard to yourself—I wired to Colorado, traced you down, and ascertained your rating. As the guardian of Miss Chavez, I can no longer object to your associating with her, if she so desires."

Pilar gave Tyrrel a smile and a coquettish glance.

"I'll be pleased to see you, Dick, any time—only Gerda of course won't let you come near the ranch."

Lobo had danced three-quarters around the pit. His rider curbed him to a stand and looked down at Tyrrel with haughty disdain.

"It is a matter of utter indifference to me, *niña*, whether your *querido amigo* comes to visit you or stays away."

A lash of her quirt across his face could not have stung Tyrrel deeper. As over the supposed hidden spring, he had continued to hope when reason told him all grounds for hope were gone. There was now no slightest suggestion of softness about her. Yet she looked more beautiful than ever to his famished eyes. He only just managed to cover his bitter disappointment with an ironical smile.

"Miss Keith is most kind. Some day I may drop in for a week-end house-party, if things break right for me."

Welsh thought he saw an opening to play up for Gerda.

"Not so fast, if you please, our busted buster. I'll let you know I'm still in the Kay Kay and expect to stay. My share in the outfit says your room is preferred to your company."

"Same to you, Mat. By the way, your friend Slim paid you his compliments. He suggested that you go to a place deleted by censor—ladies being present. I have an idea he has passed up trailing for good. He discovered that night-hunting isn't the best thing for the health. It's too much

like house-painting. You're apt to get leaded."

Gerda jumped from the thoroughbred and came up close to Tyrrel, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"You don't mean to say the snake had nerve enough to trail you!"

"Why shouldn't he? Someone induced him to believe I wasn't armed." Tyrrel smiled blandly at Welsh. "It may save the coroner trouble if I explain that I am almost as quick on the draw as my friend Mr. Howbert. Any time, Mr. Welsh, that you or your boyhood buddies desire a demonstration of the fact, consider me at your service."

The challenge was direct. Welsh reddened. He sought to cover his confusion.

"This ain't any time to talk rough — with ladies present."

"Never mind us," said Gerda, her eyes now fairly flashing. "What about Slim, Dick? You killed the snake?"

Tyrrel shook his head.

"He was only a garter snake in a rattler's skin. All he needed was a little persuasion and the chance to make a new start. He'll get well — both in body and soul, I hope. Shouldn't be surprised if he panned out white, after all."

"You shot him up and then let him go?" cried Gerda. "You're soft! You dotty fool! He'll trail you now like a wildcat. What was he after? Your contest money? He couldn't have cashed Jacarilla's check."

"Maybe I might as well have given him the cash," remarked Tyrrel. He looked from the old shaft to his flivver truck. "I've spent a good piece of it——"

"On a silly search for what isn't here and never was!" rasped the girl. "Aztec treasure — *bah!* You're a crack-brained idiot."

"Yessum. 'Scuse me one moment, ma'am."

He jumped to help Pilar dismount. She slipped down, half in his arms, and stood with her hand on his shoulder,

smiling at Gerda.

"*Santisima!* Isn't this fun! Aren't you all glad I made you believe he would be here?"

"Yes," agreed Gerda. "It has shown me he's just what I thought him. Ask him to lift you back into your saddle. We want to get up on the mesa in time to camp."

"What's your hurry?" protested Tyrrel. "It's true the hotel here is closed for repairs, but I'd be glad to put you up over night. Such a nice quiet town. No joyriders to run you down; no cabarets or jazz to jangle your beauty sleep. Some moonshine, but not much drinking."

Keith spoke for his sister.

"Thank you. We'll head for home."

"Hold on. At least the drinks are on me," said Tyrrel.

In his haste, he first opened the spigot of the tank that had been empty for three days. He turned to the other tank with cup and bucket. Pilar eagerly took the first cupful of water. She eyed him coquettishly over the brim as she drained it.

He offered the second cup to Gerda. She hesitated, more than half disposed to refuse. He stood with the brim-full tin outheld, a smile on his lips and yearning in his eyes.

"'As a cup of cold water in the wilderness,' Miss Keith. This needs ice and a touch of lemon to kill the alkali. I guess, though, you get my idea. Don't keep me waiting till the sands of the desert grow cold. They do every night . . . . but I haven't."

Gerda's eyelashes quivered and lowered. Her gaze sank to the cup. She grasped the handle with a suddenness that spilled more than a quarter of the cupful.

"Good luck!" exclaimed Tyrrel. "You've poured a libation to the red gods of Tabru — the gods of adventure, and romance, and ——"

"Your pail's running over!" broke in Gerda breathlessly.

Loss of water in the semi-desert is a calamity. Tyrrel sprang to turn off the spigot — the pail was only three-quarters full! Why had she chopped him off with that fib? The long lashes had veiled the look in her eyes. Had it been embarrassment, or was it ——

The emptied cup clattered at his feet. Whatever her feeling may have been, it now, unmistakably, was anger.

"You're a plain, unvarnished idiot!" she snapped out her exasperation. "Still letting your water run! Haven't you any sense at all? The pail may spill over."

He turned off the spigot, dipped out a cupful for her brother, and swung the pail around to the nearest horse. It happened to be Pilar's. The girl shrieked a protest:

"Oh! you mustn't! You extravagant, generous *hombre!*"

The other horses lurched towards their greedily drinking companion. Welsh jerked his beast back on its haunches with a rough heave at the curb. Tyrrel gave Keith's horse and Lobo each as much as Pilar's pony. There was still a big swallow left in the second pailful. He turned to Welsh.

"If you don't wish to drink my water, I can't compel you to, Mr. Welsh. But the Kay Kay gave me of its hospitality. I'd like, if you please, the privilege of offering the rest of this to your horse — and a cup to you."

Welsh swung out of his saddle and went to stare down the slope side of the pit. The horse thrust his dusty muzzle into the pail and sucked up the last drop. Tyrrel drew enough more to make his share even.

"Generous but wasteful," said Keith. "All of them could have made the return trip dry without hurt. There's not much left in your tank."

Lobo had started to nuzzle Tyrrel's shoulder. He stroked the high-bred beast's starred forehead, smiled quizzically, and opened his chuckbox to pour into a tin plate what was left of his sugar.

"I've heard that your poorest Mexican sheepherders will share their last *tortilla* with any visitor, Mr. Keith. I have also heard that the proud Bedouins of the desert whose sands never grow cold, are not too proud to accept hospitality even from their enemies. But you're not proud Bedouins, and I'm not a sheepherder — yet. Since you refuse to taste my salt, the best I can do is ask Lobo and his equine comrades to see if my sugar is bitter."

Gerda's cheeks were aflame with hot scarlet. She cried out, between exasperation and scorn and laughter:

"Oh, you — you impossible — windmill tilter! D'you expect us to side your idiocy? We'll eat your chuck — if you'll agree to quit this fool treasure hunt."

Tyrrel faced her, no longer smiling.

"So you take me for a quitter? Well, I may be one, but I have yet to find it out. Thus far in my joyous young life I have never laid down until I've bet my last white chip."

The scarlet in Gerda's cheeks deepened to rose-crimson. But the wave of embarrassment only added to her anger. She slapped her chaps with her quirt.

"You'll quit this gold-brick game right now, or you'll find yourself without even a last white chip for — any other game!"

"*Quien sabe? Sabe Dios* — if I may quote Miss Chavez. Or was it your brother?"

Pilar clapped her hands.

"*Bravo*, Don Ricardo, *mi querido campeador!* Of course you'll find the treasure. You're bound to!"

"Well, I'm not sure. But I've found some indications."

"Indications of a bob-tailed flush," jeered Welsh. "He's a grand bluffer. The *campeador fourflushero!* Happens, though, I'm from Missouri. You've got to show me. Indications? If you pan a trace of color out of this tomb, I'm a Missouri jackass."

"Maybe you are," blandly agreed Tyrrel. "Who am I to dispute your claims?"

Keith was dismounting. He hastened forward between the two.

"Easy, Mat. He packs that old six-gun of Pilar's *padre*. Suppose we take a look at the diggings?"

"Wait!" objected Tyrrel with feigned concern. "I haven't given you leave——"

But Welsh had caught his partner's arm and was pushing him ahead down the incline into the pit. Tyrrel followed them, frowning. Behind him Gerda turned upon Pilar.

"It's true what Donnie said! I saw the gold and pearl of the hilt. You gave him that gun!"

"What if I did?" defied Pilar. She added with tantalizing sweetness. "But of course it does not matter to you, does it, *querida dulcisima mia?* You no longer care for him. You sent him from you — to be trailed by that snake. But *I* cared. I warned him — I gave him my *padre's* gun. If the snake had struck him, I should have grieved. To you what does it matter, one way or the other? You no longer love him, *querida mia.*"

Gerda turned brusquely away and started to tighten Lobo's cinch.

When Tyrrel came up out of the pit with the other men, he saw Pilar helping herself to a second drink. Gerda was putting the sugar back into the chuckbox.

"Well?" she called sharply to her brother.

He reached up inside his big sombrero to squeeze the moist sponge in its crown. The tone of his reply was almost pitying.

"It is of no use trying to reason with a crazy man. He is blasting into the solid limestone."

"But those chinks in the rocks," said Tyrrel, wide-eyed. "What if the Aztecs pulled out the natural blocks, and chucked all that treasure in behind, and shoved the blocks

back again?"

"Oh — damn!" cried Gerda. "Will you quit this fool play, or won't you? The Kay Kay might take you on as a rider, if you should ask for it now. Later there'll be no vacancy for you."

"*Muchas gracias*, Miss Keith, but I'm not hankering to work for wages yet awhile."

"Not till you've played your last chip! All right. You'll find plenty of jobs open for you, on south in the sheep country. The prime qualification for a sheepherder is to be crazy. You'll have congenial company. Come on, everybody. Let's get out of here before we all go *loco*."

Tyrrel sprang forward to give Pilar the hand-up for which she stood waiting. As the four started off, he swept off his old hat in a grand flourish.

"*Adios, mui amigos señores.* D'you savvy that? I'm studying up on *Espaniardino.* It's a mighty *dulce linga.* How's this one, ladies? *Way-you used-to chili con carne, mis queridas señoritas!*"

Pilar giggled and blew him a kiss. Gerda rode on, flushed and hard-eyed, without looking back.

"Stark, staring, rattlepated crazy!" said Keith. "Over west of the river I've seen the gold fever stampede a whole town. But this treasure hunting is worse."

Welsh's grin of derision had given way to a frown.

"I'm not so sure. Strikes me he was just a little bit too nutty. We'll look wise as boiled owls, won't we, if he has played us for a bunch of boobs? What d'you say I lay out, over at the mesa foot, and slip back after dark to see what he's up to?"

"And get leaded with one of those old Chavez soft-nosed slugs, like your friend Slim?" scoffed Gerda. "No. If he's acting Hamlet, he's apt to play the melancholy Dane to your Polonius — 'What, ho! a rat behind the junipers. Dead,

for a ducat, dead!' "

"Better forget it all, both of you," advised Keith. "Crazy or not, what he does is none of our business, as long as he keeps clear of us."

"Oh, but you gave him leave to visit me, Don *Señor*," murmured Pilar. "I know he will come just as soon as he finds the treasure."

Gerda spurred Lobo into a gallop.

CHAPTER XXV

DEWY DIAMONDS

HAD Welsh slipped back to the dead pueblo at any time before sunset, he would have seen "the nutty slick Dick" sitting in the shade of the flivver truck. Humped up, chin in palms and elbows on knees, Tyrrel sat gazing off southwest at the dark mass of the Chupadera.

The great mesa loomed up between the pueblo ruins and the Kay Kay, huge and somber as a barrier wall of the old Norse giants. Was the barrier of her pride and temper any less high and unbreakable? Was his city of fair dreams only another desolate ashen ruin — peopled with the ghosts of dead hopes?

He had played his cards — and lost. Once or twice she had seemed about to soften. But it had been only a mock of real sentiment — like the mirage forests and lakes of the old arid desert.

What was the use? Why waste time searching for treasure? All the gold and emeralds of Montezuma would be no more than lead and green glass without her to share them with him. She had told him to quit. Good advice for a busted buster!

All right. He would crank up and pull out — East. He would start a taxi, and use a slice of his fares to buy up a packing plant. Then he would pay a quarter-cent over market for Kay Kay steers — heap coals of fire on her head ——

Fire and treasure. The glory of that gold-tinted hair when she threw back her head — the splendor of those emerald-flashing eyes! Talk about your old-time Valkyries — war-

maidens! They couldn't begin to hold a candle to her. She was a sixty-thousand-candle electric headlight. . . . .

The headlight sank below the crest of the pine-dark mesa. He jerked himself out of his day-dream back into harsh reality.

"*Ugh!* There goes the sun. Get the dazzle out of your eyes, cowboy. Come down to earth. No chance of a Valkyrie frying your ham. You're a lone lorn old batch, and it's time to feed. I sure never did know a stomach so utterly lacking in sentimentality!"

He pulled himself to his feet and let down the back of the chuck-box. In behind the meal sack was something that did not belong. He pulled it out. It was one of the big Kay Kay canteens, almost full of delicious lemon-acidulated water. No mark except the **KK** stamp on its canvas jacket.

When he had come up out of the pit, Gerda was the one putting away the sugar. Yet Pilar might have been there first. She could have slipped in her canteen — hidden it behind the sack so that Gerda would not see it. She had been taking a second drink from the tank. May that not have been to save herself from having to call upon the others for a drink before they had gone well along on the back trail?

She, not Gerda, had been the one who gave him the gun and warned him, when he left the Kay Kay. She had shown herself tender-hearted and kind; whereas Gerda . . . . yes, the canteen must have been left by the little girl. And yet there was just the bare possibility that Gerda may have been the one.

After all, why quit before using up all the dynamite?

Sunrise found him pounding his drill. He worked hard and fast. He had none too much water left. That foolish piece of bravado, watering the horses, had been only in small part offset by the gift of the canteen. Mining was much thirstier work than he had counted upon. He could of course

run the truck back to the railroad and tank up. But that would take time. Also, once away from this graveyard of a dead tribe and dying hopes, a great deal of determination would be needed to get him back.

Time flew, along with the rock chips of his blasts. Soon came the morning when his second tank was dry and the big canteen held little more than a pint. The radiator of the truck engine was full. He had filled it to the brim upon his arrival. But every drop of that would be needed for the heavy drag of the back trail in the sand.

Only a pint to keep him going through a day's work under that pitiless sun! It was his last white chip. Well, he would play it. By evening he might feel like a dehydrated red pepper. But it would not kill him. At nightfall he could start for the railroad. If the truck broke down, he could drain the radiator into the canteen and hoof-it in to the railroad.

He set to work in the gray dawn. His second shaft was already as deep as the first one, but it had not yet reached bedrock. To have to leave before scraping the solid strata and at least making certain that it was dry here, as well as down the draw, would now be maddening. He worked furiously, with no more hourly rests. After each blast he fanned the poisonous fumes from the holes by lowering and waving one of the tarpaulins.

By noon, though he had no more than wet his tongue each time, the canteen was dry — as dry as his throat. He toiled on, too thirsty to eat. Mid-afternoon found him "gantered up." By sunset his eyes had sunk into their sockets, his cheeks were hollow, his skin had the dried-parchment look of a mummy.

He lit the fuse of the charge in his last hole, dragged himself out, and tottered aside to wait for the blast to go off. He would have gone straight on to his camp, only he was too

utterly weary to make the walk without resting.

The blast roared and sent its miniature eruption of dust and rock fragments spouting from the shaft mouth. The sun was going down behind the black barrier of the Chupadera. The day was done — and so was he. That was his final shot — his reveille salute to the departing god of day and to his "busted" game.

He had played his last white chip — and lost. The game was ended. Once clear of this hell-hole, he would never come back for love or money. Well, at any rate, he had not been a quitter. He had stuck on as long as there was a fighting chance.

Now to drag back to the truck and pull out . . . . hold on. There was still something to do — a last matter of form, futile, yet necessary to his peace of mind. He must go down into that damnable hole and see if he could see that damnable bedrock.

Wheezing through his dry nostrils and his still-drier tongue-choked mouth, he lowered and waved the tarpaulin. He labored down his ladder of holes and projecting rock corners. He began to shift back-fallen stones from the middle of the blast-hole. Here was one whopping big fellow. Why be an utter fool? Leave it lie, and crawl out. But that bedrock ——

The slab of limestone lifted and toppled over to his heave. Underneath lay a little mess of shattered pottery. Who the dickens had tossed that stuff into his well?

After many moments of vague staring, the thought came to him to pick up the pieces. Perhaps that bedrock lay just under them.

The broken bits of pottery were of the same ware as those he had found in the treasure-seekers' pit. He scraped at them with his raw, blistered fingers. In the midst he touched a smooth object that had a different feel. He held it up close

before his pain-dulled eyes. It was a metal candlestick, twisted and mashed but still unmistakable.

Swift scratching outlined the unshattered lower part of the ancient earthenware *olla*. Under the fragments of its upper part and the dirt and bits of limestone were other metal objects — a small crucifix, a chalice, another candlestick, and a little bell. All were black. But the blade of his knife, scraping through the tarnish, exposed bright silver underneath.

He crouched upon his haunches, staring at his find and trying hard to puzzle out the mystery. They were of course from a church — a Catholic church. No less certainly, they were very old. Gerda had told him that the huge-walled ruin had been one of the mission churches of the Spanish friars. These altar pieces had been hidden here probably at the time of the Pueblo rebellion — or when the Apaches came in and exterminated the tribe.

So far, clear. But why this place? The draw had shown no slightest indication of any ruin. This must have been the site of a mine or one of the underground *kivas* of the Pueblo warriors — or else a well. True, there had been no sign of curbstones or walls. But ——

Again he scratched fragments. Yes, there was the outline of a niche. It led into the up-draw side of his shaft. But the twilight was fading. He must make no false plays.

He clambered out and staggered over to his camp with the empty canteen. Into it he drained two full quarts of water from the radiator, setting the bucket to catch any precious spilled drops. By exerting all his will power, he forced himself to drink in teaspoon sips. At the end of an hour his mouth and throat were fairly comfortable and he had eased his thirst enough to be able to sleep.

At gray dawn he devoured a hearty breakfast of bacon, sugar and prunes, and hurried to his shaft with the last of

the dynamite and half a canteen of water.

A little probing with a drill proved the niche theory. He drilled into the side of the shaft, three feet above the bottom. When the gas of the blast had been cleared out, he scrambled down, shaking with a fever and ague of hot hope and cold dread.

He looked into the hole made by the blast, and saw the face of a solid masonry wall. The limestone blocks were laid in hard cement. All the stonework of the dead Pueblo — even of the ancient mission church — was laid in adobe mortar.

"*Ye-ow!*" he yelled. "Spanish work — and they used cement because they had a cause to!"

He thrust his drill against the wall and swung his one-hand hammer. The drilling did not take long. He stopped when the hole was barely deep enough to hold a stick of "giant."

Up above, while the fuse sputtered, he chased wild fancies through the swirl of his brain-storm. What a joke if it should turn out to be that mythical Aztec treasure! He would stand a good show of ending like King Midas — nothing to drink unless he melted the gold or unfroze the emeralds into green dewdrops.

"*Bam!* There she busts. Now, buster boy, one more fan."

But the tarpaulin was not needed. When he started to lower it into the shaft he saw no slightest haze of powder smoke. With a yell, he tumbled down at break-neck speed.

In the masonry wall was a jagged hole nearly two feet across. Into the hole sucked a draft so strong that it blew out one match after the other as fast as he could strike them. He paused to listen. Through the hole gurgled a soft, reverberant murmur.

"Running!" he howled. "Shades of Midas, she's running! Let's run too."

He raced over to his camp and came back, panting, with a rope, his lantern and the pail. Lantern first, then head and

shoulders, he thrust in through the hole. The light glinted on the damp stones of a circular wall. Less than six feet down the rays danced upon the surface of flowing water. To the left was a ragged gap in the wall, through which the spring-rill flowed out and down into a narrow cleft.

"So that's how they killed their water. Now for a look upstairs."

He looked — only to duck his head and scrouge back into the hole. Hardly a yard above him the five-foot well was roofed over with huge rough-hewn beams of cedar. What if they should crumble and let down all the tons of fill above them onto his head?

It did not seem possible those logs could have remained there for two centuries and a half without rotting. After his days of blasting so close alongside, they must be ready to give way at a touch. And if they did crumble, the mass of fill would drop down and choke the spring!

With cautious haste, he drew back and knotted the rope to the pail. Still more cautiously, he lowered the pail through the hole and dipped it full of water. Not since he had left the mountains of Colorado had he tasted water so cool and pure.

He drank until he could not drink another drop. Then he filled the canteen and refilled the pail. After that he ventured to reach in and upwards with one of the drills. Its chisel-bit thrust only a little way into the cedar beams. They were less rotten than they looked.

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW TO MAKE 'EM LAUGH

THE Kay Kay ranch lay blistering in the arid heat of the prolonged drought. Out of the northeast jogged a big, ugly, heavy-shouldered rat-tailed rawboned horse with chuckle head down-sagged. His lean rider sat limp in the saddle, bent forward with hands on the horn to ease the jolt of the trot.

The horse appeared to be slouching along, ready to run down, like an unwound clock, and go to sleep. But his rider did not urge him to quicken his gait. The miles were crawling steadily backwards under the long swing of those big hoofs. They crawled a good deal faster than would have appeared to the eye of a casual observer.

"Ante horse," inquired his rider, "do you think it will be oats and a box stall this time, or no-trespassers-allowed? Well, anyhow, we feel gay, Ante. We may not look it, but we do. We feel like busting into song. We feel like chortling a chant of them good old days:

When knighthood went to seed,
And Qui-ho-tay rode his steed
Fiery Ante—Rosinante."

Ante sagged his head still lower.

"What? Want to be left out of it, do you? If only you were a mule, that's where you'd have come in on the chorus. Well, how does this other chortle strike you, old-timer:

Oh, young Lochinvar loped out of the west,
Out of the west, as the sun went down.
He thought of the lady he loved the best,
His heart going pitti-pat under his vest.
He yanked forth his six-gun — imagine the rest!

"Hold on. That was the wrong point of the compass. Le's have another throw, Ante horse. Please don't mind my voice. You know it's a lovely baritone; only, last time I dined with that French *chef*, one of the frogs stuck in my throat.

"Stop flopping your ears, Ante. This one's going to be a corker. Such *vim!* Such *fire!* Such *action!* A whole seething, fizzing epic, compressed and done up in tabloid form, like Fleischmann's best. *Um-m-m — Ah — A-a-a-ah —* Ah! that's it!

A-a-ah, young Lochinvar jogged from the nor'east.
The home-brew was foaming and frothing like yeast.
He skee-yewered the willun; he smiled at the lass;
And blew all the froth 'n' scum offen the — uh — range.

"*Hah!* Behold her storied castle — two-storied. The embattled battlements, the corrals, the cowsheds, and all the other adjuncts and modifiers thereunto appertaining. Keep your weather eye peeled, Loch, old boy. The Bogie Man'll git you ef you don't watch out. To lance, Quijote de la Mancha! Hone your trusty blade, D'Artagnan! We may have a close shave.

"Ante, ain't you got a particle of hoss sense? Try to remember we ain't found no Aztec treasure. Slump into a walk, get out your glycerine tears, face the camera, drag forward one weary hoof slowly over t'other. All ready? Start your action. Grind!"

They came down-slope to the Kay Kay stable at a shambling walk. Old Jake squinted up from his bridle plaiting, in the shade of the east end. Tyrrel looked down at him, long-faced.

"'Lo, you pestiferous old screech owl. How're cases?"

"*Heh!* Well, I'll be gosh-rotted if 'tain't the buster kid! Where'd you blow in from, sonny?"

"From over there, dad, riding the long, long trail that's

winding to the land o' my dreams. Folks to home?"

"There or thereabouts. Off-saddle and chase yourself in. Reckon Cookie'll give you a handout to keep you staggering till supper."

Tyrrel threw his saddle on the top rail of the horse corral and led Ante in to the box stall next to Lobo's. The thoroughbred thrust his shapely head above the side of his stalled and whinnied.

"Yes, it's me, you crazy old man-eating wolf horse," Tyrrel returned the greeting. "We've come to smouge a feed of your oats for this mule of mine. Best to get it while we can. We may have to adjourn our visit in the gloaming."

His voice sank to a murmured hum.

"'In the gloaming, oh, my darling, when the lights are dim and low.' *Whoa*, Lochinvar! Don't get ahead of your horses!"

As he slipped from the stable he came face to face with Butch and Redeye. They had recognized his saddle, and were firing questions at old Jake. Tyrrel's heart was too full of brotherly and other love to hold any rancour. He held out a friendly hand.

"Howdy, boys! What d'you say we bury the hatchet?"

Redeye had stepped back warily. Butch held his ground. Both ignored the proffered hand.

"What'd you do to Slim?" queried he of the one eye.

"What didn't I do to him! I'm telling you fellers it was somethin' awful! I done wrung from him his solemn promise he'd go home to his mammy."

"Don't you try to be funny with me," growled Butch. "Slim ain't got no maw. Never did have."

"If that is so, I'm all the more pleased over what I did. It might edify you gents to learn what that was. Write and ask him."

"We know a'ready. Mat told us," said Redeye. "You

trailed poor Slim like a snake. You shot him down in cold blood, from behind, when he had his hands up."

"All right. Have it your own way, angel-faces," agreed Tyrrel. "Trouble with you birds, you haven't nerve enough to shoot a man down, either from front or rear—if he packs a gun."

He turned his back on the pair and went over to take a small bundle from his saddlebags and unstrap one of the two canteens. Both men craned their necks to stare at the gold-and-pearl hilt that sat high in the fancy old silver-embossed holster. Neither made a move.

Old Jake cackled derisively:

"*H-Heh! heh! heh!* Mighty purty, ain't she, fellers? She's *Don* Maneel's ol' shootin'-iron. Puts 'em where you aim. They's two-three crosses on the plate. Seed her collect the third. He was a dirty cheatin' skunk of a card-sharp. Favored you a deal in looks and desposition, Red—on'y he had one more ornery eye."

Redeye jerked his thumb at Butch. They sidled around the corner of the stable. The old wrangler met Tyrrel's look with a grin.

"Don't you bother none 'bout me, kid. I'm branded Kay Kay all over from horn to hoof. They dasn't so much as scratch me—not even Big Mat. Miss Gerdy'd bite their heads off. I worked for her pa. You didn't. Best get you a pair of specs with lookin'-glass panels."

"Think I'll have to watch out behind, do you? 'Twouldn't surprise me a-tall, dad."

When he rang the old bell at the gate of the inner *patio*, he still carried the canteen and the bundle. Sooner than he expected, the prim housemaid drew the gate open a few inches to peer out at him. She was a woman. He lifted his old hat to her.

"The cat's come back, Mary Jane. Where's the canary?"

The gate swung wide open.

"Pardon me, Mr. Tyrrel! Your ringing, you know — I thought it must be a stranger. If you will take this seat, please. I will see if Miss — if the ladies are at home. Or was it Mr. Keith you wished to see?"

A girlish voice called from the midst of the garden:

"Who's who, Janet? If it's a handsome *hombre*, show him in."

Tyrrel promptly advanced.

"Hear that, Mary Jane? 'Tain't my fault, though. I was born that way. Bet you two bits, my mommy thought me the prettiest baby that ever was. But to a man, Mary Jane, beauty is a sad, sad handicap. It's apt to make him immodest — if you get me."

This raillery brought them around the bend of the path into view of the fountain. Down from the lower branches of the peach tree under which he had laid the knocked-out Keith, came a shriek, a pair of dainty silk-clad legs, and a blushing black-eyed *señorita*. From the half-filled basket beside the tree trunk straightened up a Norse goddess in old rose and green.

Both gazed wide-eyed at the housemaid's follower. Boots and chaps, shirt and hat, all were dusty and begrimed. His lean body drooped dejectedly. His face had a downcast look. The only thing bright about him was the silver of the old Chavez belt and holster.

"Oh, Dick!" Pilar cried out her disappointment and sympathy. "Then you didn't find the treasure?"

"I don't believe there's a pinhead of Aztec gold in all that graveyard, Miss Chavez," he delivered his honest conviction. His grave gaze turned to fix upon Gerda's tense face and inscrutable eyes. "Well, I done played my last white chip, ma'am."

The gray-green eyes flashed, exultant.

"You've come to ask for that job?"

"Why — no — thank you just the same, Miss Keith."

"Then why are you here?"

He shifted to the other foot and cast a glance over the wall at the sun.

"It's 'most five o'clock. I thought maybe as how you might invite me to sit on my elbow and eat a cup of tea."

Pilar giggled and dived into the basket.

"Here's half a bushel of peachy peaches, *Don* Ricardo. Wouldn't they do as well as tea?"

"Maybe, if I had plenty of cream and sugar. I like peaches, Miss Elberta —'specially real sweet ones."

Gerda spoke pleasantly to the waiting housemaid:

"Please tell the gentlemen, Janet, that we have a caller."

Tyrrel's face brightened. He smiled persuasively at Pilar.

"You might do that yourself, little girl, while Mary Jane fetches the cream and sugar."

Gerda straightened to her full height. Her chin went up. She signed the maid to go, and spoke coldly to her cousin:

"You will stay here, Pilar. If this man has not come to beg me for a job, there is no reason for him to see me alone."

"Sounds like thumbs down for yours truly," said Tyrrel. "Oh, well, let's all smile and rest our faces. I wouldn't mind a little social relaxation during this all-too-brief stop-over on my long, long trail — to Socorro."

"Socorro? You're going on west?"

"You said there are sheep ranches down the river."

Gerda's temper flared.

"You're insolent! You can make Socorro by nightfall — if you start at once and go as fast as I would like you to."

Tyrrel looked down at the empty canteen and slowly turned it over and over between his half-healed palms.

"Somebody forgot this, up there at the boneyard of my dreams. I was going to ask who belongs to it. It *was* full of

the milk of human kindness. No matter now, though. The milk has soured."

The thrust got home. Gerda winced and wavered. But only for a moment.

"Soured is right! If you want to know, I left the water, to break even with you on that fool horse-drinking stunt. I didn't intend you should get ahead of me that way."

"The joke is on you," replied Tyrrel. "I thought the milk was sweet. That was what kept me from quitting right away. Instead, I hung on. The last pint in the can was my last white chip."

"You stayed on — like a balky mule! You've made yourself the laughing-stock of all the county. Mat has peddled it over in Socorro. Better open a show there as a comedian. All you need do is to tell them who you are. That will get a laugh every time. They know *what* you are."

"Appearances often deceive," murmured Tyrrel. "F'instance, beauty — some beauty — is only skin deep."

"Some idiocy is bone deep — and the bone is on top of your neck!" cried Gerda. "No girl in the state who has a particle of self-respect would look at you, except to laugh."

"I'll not ask them to do all that. They need only smile — like this sweet little girl who gave me her dad's gilt-edged smoke-wagon. If she doesn't want it back, I'll swap her ——"

"No, no — *Poder de Dios!* Can you think I'm an Injin giver?"

"Then, *Poder de Powder River!* It's going to be gift for gift. I found no Aztec gold or emeralds. But ——"

Keith came hastening under the pear tree, with Welsh half a step behind his shoulder. Neither looked pleased. Even Keith did not offer his hand, nor did he smile.

"So, Tyrrel — you've turned up again?"

"Isn't that what the bad penny always is supposed to do?"

"Glad you admit it!" said Welsh, a trifle hazy in grammar but not in meaning.

Tyrrel looked down at the bundle in his hand and started to untie its string.

"Didn't mean to disturb you gentlemen. I'm just passing through. If someone will kindly send for the silver polish. It's just a small gift I've brought for Miss Chavez. Thought she might value them, being a Catholic. As I was remarking to the ladies, I found no gold or emeralds; but I did bust into these."

He opened out the bundle. Gerda alone held back from the forward movement to peer at the black objects in the paper. Welsh looked blank, then smiled with sardonic mirth.

"Thought so! I savvied he was that kind, Don. He's gone and robbed a church."

But Keith hushed him with a quick gesture and frown. Pilar had dropped upon her knees and was making the sign of the cross. Tyrrel placed the blackened relics in her reverent hands and took off his hat.

"There was a niche in the rock," he explained. "My guess is that some convert who hadn't backslid saved them out of the loot of the mission church, at the time of the great Spanish massacre. He planted them, and then the Apaches came and wiped out the tribe. They've stayed planted all these two and a half centuries."

"Pretty thin!" muttered Welsh.

"You say you found nothing else?" asked Keith.

"Nothing except——"

Gerda broke in with ironical sympathy.

"Except your fame as a comedian! We must not detain Mr. Tyrrel, Donnie. He is on his way to Socorro to play the lead in his big success, 'How to make 'em laugh.'"

"'Struth," confirmed Tyrrel. "And I've got a follow-up act entitled, 'How to make 'em cry.' You know the saying,

'Laughter is akin to tears.' There's going to be a lot of moisture spilled around before I finish. Well, so long, folks. *Mil gracias* for your hospitality."

Pilar sprang up, with the precious crucifix and chalice, bell and candlesticks clasped to her bosom. She clutched Tyrrel's sleeve.

"You're not going now, Dick; shame on you, Gerda! Don gave him permission to come and see me."

"After making himself so unutterably ridiculous, I should think even he would have known enough to stay away from here," said Gerda.

"You hear that, little *querido* girl? Simon says, thumbs down. Off with his head! Awful, is it not? Farewell, Barbara Allan! How I do go on! Empty heart—head, I should say—with airy nothings rattling around in its vacuity. But before I go off, there's that little matter of the peach of a stone, Pilar *amiga*. You remember, I said you should have one. What's your choice?"

"But—but that was if you found the treasure."

"Name your sparkler. Who else have I got to lavish my hard-earned pennies on? I can go as high as two-fifty, marked down to two-ninety-eight. What shall it be? A pearl to match the snowy whiteness of your teeth—and soul; a ruby to glow like the warmth of your little heart; an emerald to—no, emeralds stand for envy, hatred, and malice and all uncharitableness. But a diamond—sparkling like the dewdrops of your tender tears aglister in the sunshine of your smile."

"My Gawd!" choked Welsh.

"Oh, a diamond!" cried Pilar. "Girls always choose diamonds for their rings!"

Keith drew away from the others and very quietly went back into the *casa*. No one noticed his going, not even Pilar. She caught her breath.

"You're *so* generous, Dick! And your elocution . . . . if some other men would learn to say lovely things like that, I—I think more girls would be happy."

"Only trouble, it calls for reciprocity," replied Tyrrel.

He looked steadily at the cold eyes of Gerda. They gazed back at him, unwavering, without the slightest trace of warmth or softness. He put on his hat and lifted it to her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Keith. Like unto the face of Medea! Once more, *chiquita*, fare thee well!"

"*Adios, Don* Ricardo! I'll put these holy relics in my shrine, and pray for you."

"You're a darling!" said Tyrrel.

He kissed her upturned forehead, shot a smile at Gerda, and went striding away around the path to the gate. Pilar turned to look at her cousin. At sight of Gerda's face she gasped a little cry of fright and fled into the *casa*, clutching her relics.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HAUGHTY SPIRIT

WELSH was not lacking in shrewdness. When he saw that Keith had gone, he followed after Pilar, leaving Gerda alone in the *patio*.

At the far corner was a grape arbor. She moved slowly towards it. The bed of American Beauties was in her way. She walked through the midst. Her eyes were raised above the roses, in a vacant gaze fixed upon space. They did not see the broken stems whose thorns tore at her silk stockings, or the big buds that were crushed by her feet.

But the perfume of the bruised flowers came up into her white face. She saw him as he had bent beside her in the brilliant moonlight, that glorious night of nights, breaking off for her the thorny stems of the buds with his bare hands. Why had God cursed her with such pride — with such a temper?

She trampled over other flowers. They did not matter. They were not her roses — hers and his!

The tangle of grape tendrils across the arbor door compelled her to lower her head. It remained lowered after she sank down upon the bench. But she did not droop forward with her face upon the rustic table. She was no Pilar.

Her thoughts milled round and round in a mad whirl, lashed by rage and love and hate.

Why had he done it? Why had he made such a fool of himself? Anything else than that would have been possible for her to forgive. But for him to go and make himself the butt — the laughing-stock of the county — of the state — of the whole state!

That make-believe of his over Pilar — the silly little flirt! Even if it had been real, she could have wiped out all his memory of those pretty black eyes with a single kiss . . . . with a kiss like the one she had given him that night before the night of nights! The first man except Donnie that her proud lips had ever touched. And now they were laughing about him at Socorro — about him, the man she had allowed herself to love!

If only she could tear that love out of her heart, crush it down, stamp upon it — as she had trodden upon the roses. Their odor had risen from the dust, all the more fragrant from the trampling. Was it like the spirit of love? Not her love, most certainly! How about his?

She would not, could not bend. Her will was like steel — not a blade, but a steel column. It might possibly be broken, but it could not be bent. His mind was like his body — a bundle of whale-bone. It was supple. It gave to pressure. Yet always it straightened back to where it had been before. In reality, he was no more bendable than herself.

That frightful outlaw Still Hell would have broken the iron frame of Big Mat Welsh to pieces. Tyrrel, with his whale-bone suppleness, had ridden the king of buckers to a stand. And he had gentled Lobo with a few strokes of his hands. Well, he had tried to gentle her, and he had not succeeded. She would have sided him of her own free will — had he not gone after the Aztec hoax.

Mat had lost no time. By now the story would be spreading up the valley and down — and over to Santa Fe and Roswell — everywhere! She had friends and acquaintances in every town, most of them possessed of a hearty sense of humor. That stale old many-times-exploded myth of the Montezuma treasure! If only it had been anything else not quite so utterly silly!

He, gentle her — Gerda Keith — whose father had ranged

his first herd in Apache country! But what was he up to, anyway? He had spoken of women being like horses. This obstinacy of his — this refusal to eat crow even after his ludicrous fizzle — this refusal to ask for his job, when he well knew it would mean swift steps upwards, from rider to foreman, from foreman to partner! He had lost, yet he refused to sing low. What could be his game?

He had failed to gentle her. Was he thinking to try the curb? Come to look back, he undoubtedly had made tentative tests — only she had been quick to take the bit in her teeth, and he had not followed up.

But that was no argument he was afraid to try. Even with Still Hell he would have started off easy if his purpose had been to make that beast his own. What if he should tackle her as he had tackled that demon? It had almost killed him. Yet he had not quit. He had ridden the horse demon to a stand. How about those twin devils of her own — her pride and her temper?

A flood of scarlet fire flamed in her white cheeks. The twin devils glared from her gray-green eyes. What! He break her — Gerda Keith — third owner and equal partner in the Kay Kay? He, the penniless ruined beggar — the zany, the *bobo*, the boob, the butt of all New Mexico! The mere suggestion was a joke. Yet — he had ridden Still Hell!

A sudden cold dread clutched her heart — chilled her blood. It was like a premonition of evil. She shuddered. If he should try to break her, she would never quit. She would fight so long as there was a breath of life left in her. There would be no pause for resting. Once started, it would have to keep on. One of them would have to die.

But why be so tragic? He might never come back. Men have faced lions, swords, cannon, poison gas — only to run away from ridicule. She might hear of him next on a sheep ranch, or as dictator of a Central American republic. He

was that kind. But could even he stand the gaff of sarcasm, the sting of irony, the bludgeon of brutal gibes?

In the office Welsh was listening sullenly to Keith's careful summary of their range riders' opinions on the condition of the Kay Kay cattle and grass and water. His mind was upon another matter. What was the use of going over what they had known all along would happen if the rains held off? He broke in with brusque impatience.

"Old stuff, Don. It all boils down to this: We'll lose some, not much, on the cows and young calves. We'll lose a devil of a lot in beef — those feeders not laying on weight."

"That is how Tyrrel put it."

The name was a red flag to Welsh.

"Him? The sneaking slick Dick! He's at the bottom of the whole damnable business. You were sharp enough to unload all our own feeders during that upspurt in the market. But along comes the skunk and cooks up this deal with that old scoundrel Hack How. He buncos Gerda into buying his fake option ——"

"Give the devil his due, Mat. That end of the transaction was a bargain. For another thing, you backed her against me."

"Why?" Welsh thumped his big fist down on the desk top. "Hadn't he tangled her up with his fancy rope work? Wasn't she all primed to pull out of the Kay Kay and throw in with him?"

"Oh, well. That's all history. Didn't you tell me just now she has sent him packing for good? Our present concern is how to get out from under this feeder fizzle without too great a loss."

"May save our hides, but not our hair," growled Welsh. "We stand to lose between twenty and thirty thousand, carrying over those Lazy S Bars — thanks to your slick friend!"

"No friend of mine. You know that. But forget him, and get down to business. We're rid of him now. He has gone off for good this time."

"Has he? How about that diamond ring for the little girl?"

Keith started to rise from his desk chair, but, instead, slumped back in it and wiped the top of his head.

"That was — was only a play to hit at Gerda."

"Wait and see. I'm betting it was to give him an excuse for turning up again."

"Forget it, Mat! You've gone *loco* over the fellow."

Welsh's eyes went red.

"Can you wonder, after what he's done to Gerda — and Pilar?"

"Kindly leave Miss Chavez out of this, Welsh. I am fully satisfied with regard to the conduct of my ward. If she is interested in — anyone — that is none of your concern."

The nose of the little man had the same white, pinched look about the nostrils that had preceded his attack on Tyrrel. But Welsh was no baby.

"I'll bet there'll be blood in your eye when he gets to bragging, down there in the greaser sheep camps, about his *amar* with the *hija* of Don Miguel Chavez. But you're right. That's none of my funeral. Gerda is."

Keith tapped his desk top.

"Are you certain of that — about my sister?"

"Sure as shooting. You've known all along why I came into the Kay Kay. So has she. If that son of a you-know-what hadn't butted into the game, I'd have had my rope on her by now."

"Possibly. However, I have known of ropes being slipped or broken."

A grim smile twisted Welsh's thin lips.

"No slipping for her. She'd bust it if she did anything.

But once I get my brand on her ——"

"I have also known of brands being blotted."

"God help the rustler who tries it, after she's mine — or before!"

"I admire your sanguine temperament rather more than your sanguinary temperature," bantered Keith in the same tone of quiet irony.

Welsh squared himself in his chair.

"See here, Don, this ain't getting us anywhere. You're the last man I want to row with. I'm going to put it straight. I don't savvy women. Gerda's a mighty skittish filly ——"

"She's a thoroughbred," interjected her brother.

"Shake on that, old man! Here's my proposition: Help me get my rope on her, and I stand her share of the loss from those feeders."

The brother took off and wiped his shell-rimmed spectacles. He held them up to the light to make sure they were clear, and put them on to scrutinize Welsh.

"You can't mean to tell me you love her as much as that?"

"It's no joke, Don. I'd bust hell wide open to win her!"

Again Keith tapped his desk top.

"You have my permission to go there and try it."

Welsh's fist almost smashed the mahogany.

"You — rounded on me, have you? Won't back me to get her?"

"If I had had any such inclination heretofore, this would have disposed of it," replied Keith, as cool as his partner was hot. "You have been a big asset to the Kay Kay, Mr. Welsh — in a business way."

"That's no lie. It was my sixty thousand cash saved your outfit from bankruptcy, and you know it. I sold out the old W Bar to save you and Gerda from that. I've worked, worked like a nigger to make a go of the Kay Kay —

and this is what I get for it! Thrown down and kicked in the face!"

"Isn't that putting it rather strong, Mat? Nor would we have gone bankrupt. But what you have done is admitted. You've lived up to your contract. I have no fault to find on that score. If you wish to draw out now, you may do so in accordance with the terms. On the other hand, if you wish to stay in, you are welcome — as a business partner."

"Business be blowed! I want Gerda. I'm going to have her."

"That, I believe, is for her to decide."

There was no breaking through the calm surface of the little man. Welsh sat for several moments cooling off and thinking. At last:

"You refuse to help me?"

"I decline to interfere. Gerda is quite capable of taking care of herself."

"But you'll not buck against me?"

"I am not so sure about that. You are a cowman right, Mat. At least, you know all there is to know about the range end of the game, if not about the delivered beef end. You will keep on running strong — unless you smash your head against a stone wall. You know, the main walls of the *casa* are three feet thick."

"Her door is not."

"It's thick enough to stop a mule — but you've said it. That is one of my points. You want to smash in. No need for me to mention certain other characteristics of yours to which I object. This one is sufficient. Can't you see that if you and Gerda should hitch up, you couldn't stay hitched a week?"

"I'm willing to chance it."

"I'm not."

Welsh heaved up to lean across the desk.

"All right. We'll see about that. I call you for my third in the Kay Kay, as per contract — cash down."

"Very well. But that means one-third of the present value. If we cannot agree on the amount, it may take some time to get through the arbitration."

"I'll accept Gerda's valuation."

"I will not. That pride of hers! She would give you everything, through fear of holding back a cent that did not belong to us. No. We'll figure up the assets and liabilities — I will. If the both of you can't agree with my totals, you and I will run into Socorro tomorow and get our arbitrators started on it. I shall go in anyway. Must see if we can dispose of the feeders. Every day means more loss."

"I'll go with you in any case, Don. I've a bit of private business in town. About Gerda — I warn you to keep your fingers out of the pie. If you try to set her against me, you'll wish you hadn't. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

Frowning but with a shrewd look in the corner of his cold blue eyes, Welsh left the office. He could play rather a good hand at poker.

At dinner he kept as quiet and dignified as was in his nature, while the brother and sister discussed and disagreed over the Kay Kay valuation. Gerda's estimate was so far above her brother's that arbitration had to be decided upon. Welsh took no part in their dispute, and he very carefully made no remarks about Tyrrel.

After dessert he maneuvered Pilar out into the garden with him. Keith immediately took the opportunity to give Gerda his opinion of their partner as a matrimonial risk. No less promptly, Welsh's stock went up to par. He had not been mistaken in counting upon the girl's contrariety and headstrong willfulness.

The more her brother argued Welsh's faults, the more

favorably disposed she became towards the attacked man. This was not all due to her less desirable traits. There was her generosity. Welsh was not present to defend himself.

Still another factor was the old one of the rebound. She had broken with Tyrrel.

Last but not least was her fiercely repressed yet undestroyed dread that, if given opportunity, Tyrrel might try to break her with his broncho busting tactics. If that was his intention, the only thing in all the world that could forestall him would be marriage to another man.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DIAMONDS AND HEARTS

KEITH and Welsh did not get started for Socorro until afternoon of the next day. They drove alone, much as Pilar wished to go with them.

The mere thought of hearing her friends laugh about "that Aztec treasure boob" made Gerda hot with shame. He might even have the cheek to accost the Kay Kay party. What was he not capable of doing! At least he should not come across her in Socorro.

She was no less firmly resolved that he should not see Pilar. In this she had the backing of Keith. Pilar fled to her room in tears when her guardian mildly stated that Tyrrel had the right to visit her at the ranch, but she should not be permitted to run after him.

At the parting Gerda was more gracious to Welsh than she had been since the beginning of their trip to the rodeo. He drove to town in far better humor than Keith. Though in places the road was none too good, he stepped on the accelerator whenever speed did not spell suicide. The big car fairly whizzed along.

They made it to the feebly flowing Rio Grande and across, without a crash or even a blow-out. Keith went to see the banker, merchant, and stockman named as arbitrators in the Kay Kay partnership agreement.

Welsh first attended to his private business at the office of one of the county officials. The business was private enough to call for the slipping over of a ten-dollar bank note, in addition to the fee. Afterwards he did some small shopping for Gerda.

As he left the store he saw the weekly paper just coming off the little press in the newspaper shop. He stepped in to get a copy. The old editor gave him a wink and pointed to the headline on the front page.

There was nothing raw or crude about "A Regretful Report on the Latest Endeavor to Locate the Lost Aztec Treasure." The fake write-up had been done by one who knew his Cervantes. The style was serious. Don Quixote de la Mancha was gravely mentioned as one of the first seekers for the treasure; Baron Munchausen as another. Its existence was proved by a "literal quotation" from *Gulliver's Travels*.

Some of the packages for Gerda were wrapped in the last week's paper. Welsh untied and re-wrapped them in pieces of the new issue. He first tore off the corner of the front page, aslant the lower part of the "news story." He had the editor mark another copy as for mailing. When he returned to the car he tied up that second sheet of dynamite in the midst of the Kay Kay mail.

Keith reported that one of the arbitrators had gone up to Albuquerque for three or four days. Should they select another man to act in his place?

"Let it ride," said Welsh. "I'm willing to wait that long. You might run up the line yourself. May possibly happen onto a buyer for those feeders. The sale price will make a big item in our settlement."

"That was what I had in mind, Mat. No show of a deal here. I may go as far as Santa Fe — possibly all the way around to Roswell."

"Suits me. Take your time and look about. The better the deal you scrape up, the bigger my slice of cake."

Keith took the train north to Albuquerque. In the morning one of the first men he saw as he left his hotel was Tyrrel. He started to pass by, with a cool nod. Tyrrel stepped be-

fore him.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Keith, but you're an angel in disguise. I need to cash that check of Jacarilla Howbert's. Paid for a wire to and from his bank, to assure this bank his account is good for the two thousand. But I'll have to be identified."

"Very well, Tyrrel. I was going that way."

At the bank Tyrrel's difficulties were settled by Keith's laconic word.

"I know this man, Tom."

The cashier looked at Tyrrel with a face blank of all expression.

"How will you have it? Gold, emeralds, or traveler's checks?"

"I might say twenty-dollar goldbugs, Mr. Cash," replied Tyrrel. "They'd be handy to chuck at the midges buzzing hereabouts. Suit yourself, though. Bank notes will do. I *was* going to open a checking account with you. Man, you've missed it! I didn't find a single quarter-caret emerald or a speck of gold dust. But diamonds — all those glinting, glistening, glistering dewdrop diamonds — whole stream of diamonds, sliding, sliding, sliding!"

The banker drew back and slipped away, with a murmured excuse about bringing the money himself. Lunatics are apt to be most dangerous when they smile.

Keith's gray eyes focused through their big glasses upon the twinkling eyes of the "madman." He spoke in a low tone.

"Sliding — dewdrops?"

"What d'you think of this one — for our little girl?" asked Tyrrel.

He pulled out a pink-velvet jeweler's case from his pocket and snapped open the lid. Keith stared perplexedly at the enameled gold pansy with its small diamond dewdrop.

"But — it's not . . . . not a — ring."

"Nor a rhinestone, either. Best diamond I could pick up on short notice. Small gem, but good color and no flaws. Wouldn't want to give her one that wasn't as white and perfect as herself, would I?"

"I don't know but what I am forced to believe you, Tyrrel."

The cashier returned with two packages of twenty-dollar bank notes, each marked "$1,000.00" on its paper band. Tyrrel wadded them carelessly into the pocket of his overalls and tossed down a ten.

"You're forgetting your exchange, Mr. Cash. Keep the change. Mr. Keith, I'm obliged for your accommodating me. I'd like you to step outside and see that dewdrop sparkle."

Keith stopped in the doorway.

"What is it you want?"

"Might I ask you to take the pansy to her, with my love —my brotherly love?"

The qualification stopped Keith midway of turning his back on the teaser. Tyrrel met his puzzled look with a boyish grin.

"Well, anyhow, it hasn't reached the ring stage yet. But there's no telling. She's a little peach. I may get hungry. Better cart off the stone before I decide to get it re-set as a *hondo* for a ring noose."

"Come to my hotel. I want to talk with you," said Keith.

Up in his room, in the shady corner of the hotel, he handed Tyrrel one of his fine cigars, rinsed off his head with ice water, and went straight at his objective.

"You have found the killed water of Tabru. Is it worth mentioning?"

"I'd just as leave as not tell you now, Mr. Keith. Properly handled, it should water three to four thousand head——"

"Three to four thousand! In heaven's name, boy, why

didn't you tell us at the ranch? For you to come dragging in that way — stand there and let yourself be mocked as a fool!"

Tyrrel's smile grew a shade wistful.

"Ho, ho, the queen's jester! Nothing like a fool to fool the wise birds!"

"You didn't take that gaffing for the fun of it."

"Hardly. There's a reason. Ante is some traveler, but he isn't uppity enough to try road-racing with a Kay Kay double-six car. As it is, that spring has been filed on first by a man from Colorado."

"You can't possibly think that we——"

"Two of a kind doesn't necessarily mean that the third is white, Mr. Keith."

For a full minute Keith sucked slowly at his cigar. When he spoke, his thoughts appeared to have gone off at a tangent.

"You could make a ring of it now. I did not forbid you to come to the ranch even when I thought you a fool."

"Thanks. You seem mighty anxious to get rid of her. If I was in your shoes, I'd be apt to put up a cactus fence and buy a bulldog. What is it you dislike about the little lady?"

"Dislike her — I?" Keith choked on his cigar smoke, coughed, and forced his voice back to its usual unemotional mildness. "You must have seen. When displeased, she pouts or sticks pins into me. When pleased, she treats me like a nice old uncle."

"She's a darling! With me it's a case of 'Ah, how happy I should be if t'other dear charmer were away!' Fact is, Mr. Keith, I'm a bigger fool than I look. I'm a bear for hornet honey. I know that so far as I'm concerned, all the sweetness in that nest has been converted into vinegar. Yet——"

"In plain English, you still are in love with Gerda."

"I admit the soft impeachment."

Keith's cigar began to smoke up faster. Between puffs he spoke proverbs:

"Faint heart ne'er won fair lady. He who makes several cows grow where none grew before is no fool. He laughs best who laughs last. Pride goeth before a fall. A haughty spirit may take a tumble when she hears that laugh. A quitter quits because he has a yellow streak."

"Meaning, in plain U. S., you want me to forget Pilar and try to get my rope on Gerda — roll her pride in the dust and bust her haughty spirit. Mighty brotherly of you!"

"It is between you and Welsh. I misjudged you, boy. But I never misjudged the son of old One-Gun. I'd rather see her in her grave than married to him!"

The sudden fierce heat of this brought a glow into Tyrrel's wary eyes.

"On second thought, Mr. Keith, I mighty possibly be induced to commingle business and pleasure. How about those Her'ford feeders?"

"They are on the market if I can find an honest buyer."

"You might make more by feeding them yourself. Happens I have an agreement with Dad Howbert. But he'll not have enough head to graze all that grass. Suppose we talk deal? Your steers, my water. In that grama they'll lay on the marbled beef fast as a hog lays on fat. Figure it out and make me an offer."

"I will, if you'll return to the Kay Kay with me."

"Will I? Won't I! It's only a little sooner than I expected to take another loop on the long, long trail. Ante is waiting at Socorro. We might take him in the tonneau."

Tyrrel's voice dropped into murmured cadence:

"Oh, young Lochinvar rode out of the west, with his heart going pitti-pat under his vest."

"What's that you're saying?" asked Keith.

"Nothing much — only an Irish hymn."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RUSTLER

THOUGH dinner had been held back an hour by Gerda, she and Pilar reached their dessert before Welsh returned from Socorro. His manner was grave but pleasant.

While he was telling about the plans of Keith, Pilar broke in to ask if he had seen or heard anything of Tyrrel.

"Didn't *see* anything of him," he replied. "Heard he had pulled out. No. Cut out the soup, Janet. Make it a double portion of ham and eggs. I had no time to waste listening to jokers. Bought Gerda's things and stepped on the gas. You can guess why, Gerda. I'll have little enough time now to be near you. Don is working like a beaver to shove me out and shut the door between us."

Gerda was not in the mood to respond.

"My packages — what have you done with them, Janet?"

"I thought you'd want them sent up to your room," put in Welsh.

"That was thoughtful of you, Mat."

He rose to real gallantry.

"You're all I have to think about — or want to."

There was only a hint of mockery in her bow as she asked to be excused. He watched her out with a hungry smile, and at once shifted look and smile to the door into the kitchen passage. When the double portion of ham and eggs arrived, his mouth carried out the promise of that look.

Pilar shuddered as she watched him, between nibbles at her cake.

"Once upon a time," she murmured under her breath, "there was a giant ogre, and he gobbled little pigs and big

pigs, little girls and big girls. But a brave *muchacho* — a very brave youth indeed — came riding by, and he said to her, 'Little princess, why do you weep?' But the queen-girl, who was the ogre's *señora*-to-be ——"

The queen-girl came flying into the room, cheeks aflame, eyes flashing with rage. She waved a torn and crinkled half sheet of newspaper at Welsh.

"You did this! It's your work!"

He looked up, the image of astonishment and dismay.

"What! You don't mean to say I went and bought the wrong stuff?"

"No, no! This — this damnable article!"

With a grave show of sympathy and concern, he took the torn sheet and smoothed it out on the cloth beside his plate. His pretense of a frowning, puzzled examination of the different headlines ended in a start of interest and a quick stoop forward to read.

Gerda stood over him, hands clenched, bosom heaving, teeth set hard in the effort to restrain her fury. She was watching his look of surprise flash into mirth. He flung back his head. Open gaped his mouth. Out bellowed a roar of laughter. But almost instantly he clapped his hand over his mouth.

"'Scuse me, Gerda. The way the thing started off, I thought he had put one over on us — that he'd really made some kind of a find. But when I came to this about Baron Munchausen — d'you blame me for exploding?"

"Read on down," ordered Gerda — "there where the tear-off begins — that allusion to the ladies of the Kay Kay. How could the burro who wrote this drivel have known of his coming here if you did not blab?"

Welsh sprang up, scowling.

"The dirty dog! I warned Don he might talk about Pilar. But you — think of him bringing you into this! Lord,

Gerda, how they'll ride you! If only there was some way to head 'em off — some way to prove you're not interested in him. Of course it would choke 'em off if you'd care to — to make me the luckiest man in the world! But you can't do that very well, even if you want to. Don would refuse his consent."

The tortured girl went upstairs to her rooms, in a fever-chill of humiliation and anger. Welsh smiled and attacked his ham again with redoubled relish.

The wondering eyes of Pilar saw the paper flutter to the floor. She came timidly around the table and picked up the torn sheet. As she read, her gasps of indignation won a chuckle from Welsh.

"What a shame!" she cried. Her voice sank to a whisper. "But maybe the ugly ogre will go off with his queen-girl, and leave the little princess to her *querido* ——"

Welsh made no attempt to follow up his move. Best to let Gerda chew on the bitter mouthful. He went out to the horse corral to rope his best horse and a gentled mare favored by Pilar. He put them in the box stalls alongside Lobo, and gave each a big feed of oats.

In the morning he came to breakfast a trifle late, dressed for riding. Gerda was in her trig motor costume. There were shadows under her eyes, and her cheeks had lost some of their rich color. With all his shrewdness, he could make nothing of her cool disdainful look.

She dismissed the maid and looked him over with a critical scrutiny.

"Shaved, I see. But that's no rig to wear traveling with a woman. We're going to town."

"Not to Socorro, Gerda! They're all primed to ride any Kay Kay ——"

"It's the nearest place to get a license."

He all but whooped. The effort required to choke down

the yell gave him a very real appearance of being overcome with emotion. It brought moisture into his eyes and put a quaver into his voice.

"Gerda! You — you can't mean ——"

"Have you any objections?"

Welsh's big face glowed with genuine blissful delight. Even his blue eyes softened.

"You're a queen, Gerda — *my* queen!"

"Cut out the slush. It makes me sick. Pilar, go and get out of that sloppy breakfast coat into something decent for town. You can act as witness, if not as bridesmaid. Go on. Don't stand there gawking like a gosling! If you don't hurry, you'll have to start off without breakfast."

"Please — one moment," said Welsh. "Gerda, we can ride south to that Mexican mission. The old *padre* who came to see Pilar has left, but I've heard there's a new one in charge. It would save you the — the unpleasantness of those Socorro funny-fellows."

The argument appealed to the girl's sore spirit. She had brooded all night long. The slightest suggestion of ridicule was like a dash of salt and vinegar on her rasped pride. Her dry hard eyes glinted with relief.

"Why — that isn't such a bad idea . . . . only — the license."

Here was the ticklish play. The slightest false move, and she would dodge the noose. She would jump beyond his reach. His voice this time quavered and broke with real emotion. To have his rope all but on her, yet to feel the sickening doubt that the cast might serve only as a slap in her face!

"I've got something to — to own up, Gerda. It was gally of me. But I was thinking only of you — that you might agree to favor . . . . that is, that this would save you from their riding you — in case you wanted ——"

"Get it out!"

"Well, then — I got the license ——"

"Oh, you did?" The gray-green eyes blazed. "Sure of me as all that, were you?"

"Wait! hold on!" Welsh's voice blared with genuine distress. "I wasn't — not at all, Gerda! It was only the thought of helping you — to be forehanded for you! I didn't count on it a little bit — and I took mighty good care to keep it under cover."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Mendozo is not to make the entry in the records unless we send word. I figured that Don might get wind of it and head you off. Here's the license. All you have to do is burn it up. That will wipe out the whole ——"

Gerda caught the paper from his outreaching hand. Without a glance inside its folds, she crumpled it into the pocket of her linen motor wrap.

"Tell Jake to saddle up, while Pilar and I change," she said.

To reach Welsh, the last word had to follow him through the doorway. It was one of those occasions when one shot first and asked questions afterwards. The great need was to give the girl no time to think. Loss of the daintily served meal did not bother him. He had eaten breakfast with the men. At the same time he had told Cookie to put up a good snack for three.

He cooled his heels for a long half hour, waiting at the gate of the inner *patio*. Best not to seem in too much of a hurry. At last, unable to repress his anxiety over the delay, he sent in word that the horses were ready. The girls had changed to riding dress and were sipping a second cup of coffee.

At the gate, before drawing on her gauntlets, Gerda handed him a worn gold ring. It was the only thing he had

forgotten.

"Be careful. It was my mother's—" she glanced past his shoulder towards Lobo. Her eyes flashed with her all-too-ready anger.

"That thing—today!"

Welsh stared around. Tyrrel's splendid gift, the silver-mounted saddle, shimmered softly in the morning light. Welsh bit off a curse.

"*Uh,* Jake! The old—take my horse, Gerda. I'll catch up with you in two shakes."

He leaped into the silver saddle. Lobo promptly went up into the air. Welsh pulled him down and spurred him out through the big archway with harsh mastery. It may have been the sight of his strength and skill that decided Gerda. Whatever else might be said of him, he was no weakling. She signed for Pilar to mount.

Half a mile south of the *casa* Welsh overtook them. Gerda shifted to her old saddle and curbed Lobo's prancing with a grip as harsh as that of the man she was going to marry. When the other horses had warmed up, she quickened the gait to a lope. Many long miles lay between them and the little old mission.

They reached the squalid Mexican village close upon noon. The small adobe parish house beside the adobe church appealed to Gerda no more than the dirty hovels and ragged "greasers." She insisted upon waiting under the first of the cottonwoods that straggled along the bank of the arroyo.

Welsh rode ahead to the parish house. After he had knocked two or three times, the door was opened. He pushed in. Pilar had started to open the lunch. Gerda's nerves were on edge.

"Let that wait!" she ordered. "Greedy little pig! Can't you think of anything else than something to eat?"

"*Si, si, señora?* I can go and talk with better-mannered

ladies."

"Stop that! How dare you call me *señora?* You know it's bad luck to address a — a bride as a married woman before the wedding."

Pilar's black eyes were wide and round as she hurried away. It was like her cousin to get into a temper. But for her to be superstitious was most unnatural.

At the first hovel the girl gave a courteous greeting in Spanish to the gross halfbreed woman, who was stirring a potful of beans in the open-shed kitchen. The woman responded no less courteously. Pilar asked a question. The woman's reply surprised her. She repeated the inquiry. This time the woman added emphatic gestures to her words.

The surprise of the girl gave place to a slowly dawning smile of mirth. She pressed a coin into the woman's hand and started back towards Gerda. After a few steps she remembered that Welsh was still in the parish house. What could he be lingering for?

She hastened past the hovel. The tread of her little boots in the soft sand was soundless. The small, high, side-window of the parish house gaped without curtain or glass. Through it rumbled the deep voice of Welsh. He was speaking loudly, in a jargon of mixed Spanish and English.

Pilar stopped short to listen. Welsh paused. A numbling, hesitating voice answered him in the same jargon. Pilar's smile faded. She stepped lightly away.

She found Gerda gazing off north along the Chupadera, her dry eyes wide with silent anguish. Before that look all the long-accumulated resentment of the younger girl was overwhelmed by an upsurge of pity.

"Oh, Gerda — you still love him! Let's jump on our horses and run away from the ugly ogre. He's planning to take advantage of your ——"

"Be still!" cried Gerda. "You silly chattering nut-jay!

I'll take no meddling from you or anyone. Where's Mat? What's keeping him? Does he think I want to take a *siesta?*"

Up bobbed again Pilar's resentment. She pouted.

"You needn't bite my head off. I'm not your bridegroom's *dueña.* No doubt he's making arrangements for the wedding. There he comes now."

Welsh rode back at a dash. He jumped off and broke into profuse apologies at Gerda's first bitter word over the delay.

"Sorry, mighty sorry! It's that measly—" He glanced sharply towards Pilar—"that '*No Se*' priest. Took a long time to get it into his head what we wanted. You see, you've got the license. Then he had to ask a big string of questions about our religion."

"We're both Protestants. No need of a dispensation."

"Yes, but when he found that out, he stuck against having a church ceremony. Fact is, he balked over doing it at all. I had to offer him a big bunch of green—for his church. Even then he insists on it being in the house."

"What difference does it make? Let's hurry up and get it over with. This place looks and smells like the abomination of desolation."

"I'm mighty sorry. The house was in a bad mess. We'll have to wait a little while for him to slick it up. We can be eating."

Gerda turned her shoulder to him and shifted around to lean her back against the tree trunk. She pushed away the sandwich and fried chicken that he offered her, and gazed off again towards the far-distant north end of the Chupadera. Though worried, Welsh managed to make away with over half of the lunch before a bright-colored *serape* fluttered from the door of the parish house.

"All set, Gerda," he said. "Let's go."

They rode to the house. A few ragged dirty children

started to gather. Welsh held back and promised a dime to each one that helped water the horses.

The small front room into which Gerda led the way was disorderly and smelly and dark. The doorway was close curtained. A shrine had been set in the little window, shutting out much more light than was given by the single candle at its foot.

Some moments passed before either Gerda or Pilar perceived any more than the dim outlines of the robed figure at the rear of the room. Welsh gently drew Gerda's hand under his arm and led her forward.

"All right. We're ready. Begin," he said.

The priestly figure made the sign of the cross, held up a breviary, and began to read in a half-chanting mumble. The first prayer brought Pilar to her knees. Gerda wavered and ended by sinking down in front of her cousin. Welsh remained standing.

Owing perhaps to the dim light, the sing-song voice at times stumbled and hesitated and halted. Parts of the marriage ceremony were omitted. But they were not necessary parts, and the bride and groom were both Protestants.

At the end, omission also was made of the blessing. But neither Welsh nor Gerda asked for one. Welsh was fully satisfied. He had put the wedding ring upon Gerda's finger, and they had been pronounced man and wife in broken English.

Gerda swayed, faint from the close, smelly air of the room and more so from the stress of her repressed emotions. Welsh hurried her out through the curtained doorway.

"It was that infernal air in there," he muttered with genuine concern. "Steady her, Pilar. Help her mount."

"How about the register and the signing of witnesses?" asked Pilar.

"That's so. Come in and sign, soon as you help her into

the saddle. I'll be seeing he gets the entry right. Our other witness is his housekeeper, he said — his sister. She was behind that screen. Dress too dirty for company, I guess."

Gerda raised her white face and drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

"Be quick. I want to get away from here."

Pilar followed Welsh back into the room and witnessed the entry written at the top of the newly turned page of the old parish register. At the curt order of Welsh, a slatternly woman moved forward out of the darkest corner and began to scrawl under Pilar's name.

Outside they found Gerda mounted, impatient to start. If Welsh had any intention of saluting his bride, he was disappointed. She gave Lobo the spur.

CHAPTER XXX

"GO GET HIM"

A CAR hired by Keith had brought him and Tyrrel to Socorro early enough for them to reach the Kay Kay on horseback by mid-afternoon. As a matter of principle, Tyrrel put Ante in a box stall, along with a big feed of oats.

"Always take what you have coming to you when it comes," he said.

Old Jake told them that Welsh and the girls had ridden off south to look at the lower water-holes. Keith was almost as disappointed as Tyrrel. But they could do little else than wait. To close any important Kay Kay deal required the consent of at least two of the partners.

While his host figured out the terms of an offer Tyrrel lay in the shade of the tree beside the fountain, eating peaches and day-dreaming of his Glory Girl. They would spend the evening, like that other one, over there with the American Beauties.

Sunset was near before he heard the voice of his Glory Girl at the gate. It struck a rather high and by no means agreeable note. Clearly she was not in the best of humors. But he sprang up, eager for the meeting that should clear him of his foolship and open wide again the gateway of her heart.

The three came around the bend in the path. Pilar, with a half-frightened half-exultant look, was listening to the sharp dispute between Gerda and Welsh. She was first to see the visitor.

"Oh, Dick! How could you dare? *Santisima!* I know. You've brought me my diamond!"

Gerda's heat against Welsh chilled as suddenly as if she had been plunged into ice water. She stopped short and stared at the visitor as if unable to believe her eyes. He saw her expression change swiftly from incredulity and amazement, through wonderment, into dismay — almost terror. A moment of that; then came the inevitable flare of temper, fronted by hauteur.

"Donnie, you will invite this — person — to get out and stay out."

Her brother, pencil and notebook still in hand, stepped half in front of Tyrrel's shoulder.

"Kindly control yourself, Gerda. He is here to ——"

"To rope the golden fleece you sheared from the Chavez sheep — rustle it, along with your little ewe lamb. Let him take her at once and clear out."

Tyrrel moved forward, opening the pink velvet jeweler's case.

"Now, now, Glory Girl," he appealed, "don't go off at half-cock, please. I haven't brought her what you think. Look. Isn't it just the thing for her — a dewdrop in a pansy!"

"Why, Dick," exclaimed Pilar. "It's not a ring. But how lovely! How perfectly exquisite! You *dulce, dulce hombre!*"

"Glad you like it, little girl. I picked it out because it matches its present owner. You'll notice the pansy is heart-shaped. But that is a dewdrop on it — not a tear."

"Keep your slush for private consumption," scoffed Gerda. "Donnie, if you don't run him off the Kay Kay at once, Mat will."

"That remains to be seen."

"You call for a show-down, do you?" put in Welsh. "Here's my hand. I hold a royal flush. Do you savvy?"

He put a possessory arm around Gerda's shoulders. She

quivered, almost shuddered, yet made no move to shrug off his thick arm or wrench herself out of its grasp. She looked at Tyrrel with a smile of exultant disdain on her lips and hate in her eyes.

The look served only as goad to his ardor. He took another step forward.

"You've made a little mistake, Mr. Welsh," he said. "This isn't poker we're playing. It's euchre. Hearts are trumps, and I'm the Jack of Diamonds, Jack of Hearts, and the Joker, all in one. First trick, I'll take the Queen of Hearts out of your hand. Glory Girl, just let me tell you about that——"

"Aztec treasure!" gibed Welsh. "You're flapping in the wind, Slick Dick. This game's draw poker. I've drawn this card." He pulled the gauntlet from Gerda's left hand. "Look for yourself. You're not the Joker. You're the joke. Tell him, Mrs. Welsh."

The last taunting word reached Tyrrel as if from a great distance. His widening eyes were fixed upon Gerda's wedding finger. The disdain of her look did not lessen. Yet her hand lifted and pressed hard against her bosom.

The tip of Tyrrel's tongue ran along his dry lips.

"Glory Girl . . . . why don't you speak out. Tell me—it's not true."

That torturing agony behind her anger goaded her into derision.

"Mrs. Welsh answers, yes. She laughed at the joke, and married a man."

Tyrrel's lips twisted in a ghastly attempt at a smile.

"I caw. The joke is on me. I held both hearts and diamonds. Should have chucked the diamonds into the discard. Instead, I played them first—and lost out on hearts."

Keith put a friendly hand on the bowed shoulder of the loser.

"Don't blame yourself too much, boy. I know her far better than you do. Yet I would not have thought she could be so rash as this."

"That will do for you, Donnie," said his sister. "What you now have to bear in mind is that Mr. and Mrs. Welsh, between them, own a two-thirds interest in the Kay Kay. Whether we put you out, or go out ourselves, or all stay in, is a matter to be settled later. Right now, though, the majority vote is that this person be run off our range and kept off."

"One moment, if you please. This is a matter of business. Mr. Tyrrel stands ready to furnish us, on fair terms, the best of grass and water for our feeders."

"He does, does he?" said Welsh. "I'll tell the world, that beats the Aztec hoax all hollow."

"It certainly does," agreed Keith. "He did precisely what you feared he might do. You may remember, when we left him at Tabru, you said we would look as wise as boiled owls if he had played us for a bunch of boobs. How do you feel you are going to look six seconds from now?"

"Maybe I've got an ace up my sleeve my ownself. Shoot!"

"The treasure he was looking for was the killed water of Tabru. He found it."

The blow was a jolt to the solar plexus. Welsh gaped like a fish out of water. His brick-red face took on a greenish hue. In an attempt to cover up, he bellowed:

"Like hell he did!"

"No, the hell of it has come since," murmured Tyrrel, his rueful eyes still fixed upon Gerda's flushed face.

She perceived the truth, yet struggled against belief.

"Killed water? One of those muddy little alkali seeps!"

"Pure water," said her brother, less sick than Tyrrel over the mess she had made of it all, but far more angry behind his mask of quiet irony. "Pure, clear, limestone water—

running water — enough for three or four thousand head."

The flush died out of Gerda's face. She went so white that her brother feared she was — for the first time in her life — about to swoon. Welsh felt her rigid body go lax, and tightened his clasp to support her. He drew her close and sought to kiss her colorless lips.

Her sickened eyes blazed. She wrenched herself free from him. But it was more as if he were an inanimate obstacle than an enemy. All her anger centered upon Tyrrel.

"You! To let me believe . . . . act that lie to me! Stand and let them jeer at you — *augh!*" She clutched at her throat. "Fool! fool! fool! If only you had told me!"

Tyrrel put his hand half way out and drew it back to hide its shaking.

"You had me roped, Gerda. That wasn't enough. You were set on hog-tying me. I had to show you. I'd have told you before hand — would have been glad to have you with me on the venture — only you refused to go halvers on the bossing. You didn't want me to have enough of a stake to be independent."

"Independent! Didn't I tell you, way back there, other side the Lazy S Bar, no real man need be afraid of a girl's money?"

"Not your money, Gerda, but your methods. You wanted to make it a handout. You wanted to ride me. Because of that, I could not tell you about my wildcat until I had it treed."

"But afterwards, when you came from there ——"

"All primed to let you into the secret! Who was it, right here beside the fountain, who headed me off from a private interview — who made Pilar stay, and sent for my dear friend Welsh? Who was it said there was no reason for her to see me alone unless I had come to beg for a job — meaning, to crawl to her?"

All the anger had died out of the girl's eyes, leaving only the gray of despair.

"You — you could have told before Pilar!"

"I could — and would. I could have told before Welsh — could have and would have, and counted upon a white man named Keith to get me first to the land office. I would have done it — if you had given me a shadow of a shade of faith and fair play."

It was the truth. She could not deny it. Yet pride would not let her admit anything. She shifted her attack.

"You allowed them to ridicule you, not only then, but before — up there at Tabru!"

"The queen's jester. The queen also laughed at him, not with him. That's the nub of it. I was told to put on a show entitled, 'How to make 'em laugh.' I did. It was a whooping success. Now I'm staging the follow-up, 'How to make 'em cry.' It's a moist theme — that spring. I'm not laughing over it very much my ownself."

Tyrrel's eyes were anything else than exultant. Yet temper still lashed the girl's pride with the stinging nettles of chagrin.

"Weep if you want to," she scoffed. "The Kay Kay stays dry."

"With even its milk of human kindness soured!"

"That'll do from you," blustered Welsh. "I'll have no also-ran insult my wife. No wonder you're sore, with her still laughing at the way she spilled you."

"How about yourself?" inquired Tyrrel. "Strikes me the jester proved to be the joker, and somebody was euchred. That water has been filed on — cinched — hog-tied. Do I see a Missouri jackass around here who looks wise as a boiled owl?"

All the advantage of the bitter exchange rested with the Coloradoan. He stood calm and smiling, his hands well away

from the old Chavez holster. Welsh's eyes were bloodshot. His face was purple.

Gerda looked from him to Tyrrel and back at him. The pupils of her eyes dilated. She drew Pilar to one side.

"Mat," she asked, "didn't you hear what he said? Or have I married a fourflusher with a yellow streak?"

The quiet scorn of the question stung Welsh far more than if she had slashed him in the face with her quirt. But before he could make a move to draw, Keith sprang before him.

"Don't let her egg you into suicide, Mat. What if she is playing to rid herself of her new husband?"

The shrewdly put question checked the furious man as no reasonable appeal or argument could have done. His jaw fell. He turned his out-thrust face sideways to peer at Gerda. Her lip curled. She spoke, not to him, but to her brother.

"Stand aside, Donnie. Let's see about that streak."

"Wait, Mat! listen!" exclaimed Keith.

He stepped forward to put his hand on Welsh's shoulder and pull as if to draw him down for a whisper. Gerda cried a warning:

"Watch out, Mat! He's getting your gun!"

Welsh clutched for his pistol a fraction of a second too late. Keith's fingers had already grasped the hilt. As he sprang clear he flung the big automatic half way across the garden.

"We've had enough of this sort of thing," he snapped. "What's done is done. Throw it over your shoulder, Mat. You too, Dick. No use asking Gerda. But we're men—business men. We'll close a deal for grazing our feeders at Tabru. Then, Dick, you will oblige me by leaving. This silly melodrama is not good for Pilar."

"Oh, no, no, Don *Señor!*" cried the girl. "*Poder de Dios!* It's all so delightfully exciting! Look at Dick. He hasn't turned a hair!"

Gerda took a step towards Tyrrel.

"No use wasting your time here," she said. "There will be no feeder deal — and my husband is now unarmed."

She started towards the veranda. Welsh sought to right himself with her.

"You heard my wife, buster boy. *Vamos.*"

"Not until he has had supper," said Keith. "I brought him here as my guest."

"All right," agreed Welsh. "As a favor to my wife's brother, he can stay to eat. After that, if he doesn't hit out, I'll shoot him on sight."

"I'll borrow a lantern," offered Tyrrel. "It may be dark when I get through supper."

He took off his hat and kissed Pilar on the forehead, as at their last parting.

"Good-bye, little girl. Maybe I'll turn up again some day. Who knows? Be good to yourself."

She murmured a smiling "*Vaya usted* ——"

Unable to resist the impulse, Gerda glanced over her shoulder. She saw Tyrrel sauntering towards the gate, around the bend of the path, with her brother at his elbow. Welsh started to face towards her. She walked into the house rather hurriedly.

Pilar turned and perceived Welsh following her cousin. His face had that hungry ogre look. She gave a little cry and darted off aslant the garden. The trees and shrubbery masked her flight up the outside stairs in the far corner of the veranda. She ran tiptoe along the upper corridor and slipped in at the door of her boudoir, a moment before Gerda came up the main stairway.

Round-eyed and breathless, the young girl knelt down to peep and listen at her keyhole. Gerda appeared in front of the ponderous old iron-bound, solid-oak door of her boudoir, almost directly across the corridor. From the top of the

main stairway came the clump of Welsh's heavy, hasty tread.

In a panicky hurry, Gerda pulled shut her door and locked it on the outside. But her look became cold and disdainful as she faced Welsh. Behind the keyhole the little eavesdropper pressed her hand to her lips to muffle a gasp of relief. She peeped again just in time to see Welsh come at Gerda with a rush. He flung out his arms to grasp his "queen-girl."

"Don't try to dodge!" he cried. "I've got you now!"

She did not dodge. She stood with her back against the wall and faced him with a look that stopped him at the very height of his passion.

"No," she denied, "you haven't. You never will have me unless you can prove yourself the better man. I did not marry a fourflusher."

Welsh almost bellowed:

"You're my wife. You can't deny it."

"In law! Stand away. If you lay a finger on me, I'll kill you just as sure as I am the daughter of Apache Keith. I took you for a man. That boy has made you look what you called yourself. He has thrashed you. He has fooled you. I'll say nothing about that snake Slim. That may not have been your doing. But now——"

"I'd have settled matters out of hand if Don hadn't butted in. Couldn't chance hurting the brother of my wife. All the same—you heard me—I gave him notice. I'm not bluffing. He's not going to get away this time."

"Your father would have acted first, and done his bragging afterwards."

"Same here," said Welsh, his mouth like a gash across his outthrust jaw. "It's going to be one, two, three—go get my pistol, go get my man, come get you."

He swung about and thumped off along the corridor. Gerda stood motionless, her eyes dilating with horror. It

was her look of utter anguish and despair that terrified the little eavesdropper into action. Her windows opened on the upper veranda. She tiptoed to the nearest one, slipped out, and scurried for the veranda stairway.

She was down in the garden and almost across to the gate before the deadly deliberation of Welsh brought him to the foot of the inside stairway. But the terrified girl pictured him rushing for his pistol as he had rushed at Gerda. She flew across the outer court to the bunk room. Butch and Redeye, being pets of Welsh, had come in ahead of the other men. They leered at the wild-eyed girl.

Neither Keith nor Tyrrel was in the bunk room. She darted through the mess hall to the kitchen. Cookie, intent upon his battery of steaming pots and sizzling pans, at last guessed at the meaning of her incoherent gasps, and grunted a word: "Stable."

The run from the *casa* gate to the stable was long enough to take the edge off her terror. Every fearful backward glance showed more distance between her and the gateway, with no sign of Welsh charging in pursuit.

Tyrrel was talking quietly with Keith while he stowed a package of biscuits and bacon in his saddlebags and fastened on a filled canteen. The inrush of Pilar sent his hand darting to his hip. She cried out her message, breathless but coherent:

"Gerda jeered him! He's coming — to get you! One, two, three — first his pistol, then you, then ——"

Tyrrel nodded to her guardian and spoke without any change from the quiet tone of their conversation:

"I'll go out in front. Take her back through and around the horse corral."

"No, no, not in front, Dick! They were there in the bunk room — Butch and Redeye! He'll bring them along!"

"Saddle up!" urged Keith.

"For only three of them?" asked Tyrrel. "I'll be justified in standing behind the door post. He's coming before time, and he's not coming alone."

"As a favor to us, boy! There's no discredit running from such odds," Keith insisted. "Think of Gerda! Think what it will mean to her, all her life, if, as a result of her egging him on, either one of you——"

The saddle swung up in Tyrrel's hands. As Keith ran for the front door, facing the *casa*, he called out a command for Pilar to hurry away through the rear entrance. She picked up Tyrrel's bridle and held it ready for him.

"They're leaving the gate," warned Keith. "*Niña*, run along — quick!"

She gave him a gaily mocking wave of her little hand and reached out the bridle to Tyrrel.

"They're starting to run!" called Keith. "*Niña! niña!* be sensible! Go quick!"

Without waiting to put on the bridle, Tyrrel trotted Ante back through the big stable. Pilar darted ahead to open the rear door. As Ante lunged through the opening, Tyrrel paused beside the girl. Keith saw them clearly, silhouetted against the rectangle of glaring sunshine. He saw Pilar's arms go up to Tyrrel's neck.

The sound of rapidly thudding feet told him the attackers were close. He stepped backwards from the front door, turned, and quietly faced the charging men. All three had their guns drawn.

"Where's — Tyrrel?" panted Welsh.

"See here, Mat — you gave him until after——"

The attempt at delay proved futile. Welsh jerked his thumb at his gunmen.

"Round to left, Red. To right, Butch."

"Watch out for Pilar!" cautioned Keith. "She's——"

A clatter of hoofs sent all running to the left corner of

the stable. Ante, still bridleless, was sprinting off at top speed. Welsh and Butch and Redeye blazed away as fast as they could fire. But the distance already was too great for accurate shooting with pistols.

Tyrrel waved his loose bridle overhead. Welsh cursed. He took the gay gesture for mockery. In reality it was only a response to Pilar's fluttering handkerchief.

CHAPTER XXXI

SIDED

NINETY miles in a night has been made a very few times by expert riders on very good horses. But beyond the east line of the Kay Kay range loomed the immense hulking barrier of the Chupadera. Without light to see his way, even Ante, with his wolfhound hindquarters and massive, deep-chested forebody, must have gone slow over the great mesa.

But nightfall found the quarter-moon shining high and bright. It guided horse and rider up the course of the daylight-chosen ascent that they had made on their first crossing. Ante breasted the slopes at a pace that would have broken the hearts of most horses. At the hardest climbs Tyrrel jumped off and scrambled ahead. Once up the western face of the mesa, it was mostly lope and jog-trot all the way across to the pitch of the eastern descent.

Down below, on the lower, leveler ground of the prairie, Ante's big hoofs drummed in a steady, mile-devouring gallop. By this time even most extra good horses would have given out. The big fleabitten gray, unbroken by the tremendous exertion of the mesa crossing, ran on and on with the tirelessness of a gray wolf.

The moon went down. Ante loped along in the starlight, hour after hour. They crossed the railroad, struck between the peaks, and slanted for the Lazy S Bar.

As the gray in the east blushed into rose, Ante loped the last few yards through the cottonwoods and came to a halt before the door of the old ranch house. Tyrrel slipped down, swayed like a sailor just landed, and started to loosen the strap of his cinch. Ante's head sagged low. For once

in his life he was as weary as he looked.

Jacarilla Howbert craned his scrawny neck out of the doorway and shot a streak of tobacco juice aslant the log wall. He cast a seemingly incurious glance at the stiff-backed rider and sweat-lathered, spraddle-legged horse.

"Howdy, son," he casually greeted. "You're a mite earlier this time. Step in and feed your face."

Tyrrel stripped off the saddle and bridle. With a deep heave of satisfaction, Ante let himself down. He rolled once, he rolled twice, he rolled the third time.

"Fifty dollars a roll," grunted the cowman. "Purty fair hoss. Might be worth mebbe a hun'erd and fifty."

Ante struggled to his feet and shook himself.

"Make it ten times that, and you wouldn't get him," said Tyrrel. "We left the Kay Kay ranch house at sundown."

Howbert sang out over his shoulder in a nasal tone:

"*Hey*—one you no-'count, good-for-nothing longhorns, pile out here and give this hoss a rub-down. Make it two of you, and don't be all day, if you know what's good for your health."

A rush of men crowded past him through the doorway. They nodded greeting to Tyrrel and stared curiously at Ante.

"You got something to look at," said their boss. "Them kind don't come in flocks. That's a hoss as is a hoss. Get a move on you. They kicked off the Kay Kay dust at sundown, says the kid."

Not two but half a dozen men jumped to obey. They were more than willing to serve that chuckle-headed king of long-distance racers.

Tyrrel went in with his host, walking stiffly and a bit unsteadily. He waited only until he had tossed down his first cup of coffee.

"Your tin can ready to rattle?"

"Want I should take you to town?"

"No, railroad. I'll need a man to side me — a good shot with plenty of sand."

"As how?"

"Struck that killed water I went to look for. It's good for three-four thousand head."

"By ginger! Water at Tabru . . . . and that there grass! Shouldn't wonder, son, if you mightn't size up as a go-getter. You sure went and done it."

"We're apt to be done. I filed on the water. But no need to tell you, dad, that with a Welsh bucking our game, possession is nine points of the law."

"*A-huh* — nine points she is. Used to be all ten. How 'bout me taking a jog up that way with a couple boys?"

"No. I've thought it all out. I'd like you to get your feeders rounded up. I have a truck and pump waiting at the railroad north of Tabru. Soon as I get the pump working I'll send in your man with a wire to start the drive."

"*Huh,*" grunted the cowman. "Want all the fun your ownself, do you? Well, I reckon I can still poke a rifle muzzle some'ers towards where it'll do the most good. I'm a-going to side you, son."

He went to reach down two high-power rifles and their cartridge belts from the old longhorn rack over the narrow slide window.

"'Twon't hurt none to have 'em for comp'ny, I reckon."

Half an hour later he and Tyrrel were rattling along in his disreputable flivver in the opposite direction from Tabru. The longest way around sometimes is the shortest way home. He drove seemingly with a bootleg joyrider's zest for speed and risks. But Tyrrel soon noticed that he did not hit any bumps quite hard enough to shake the flivver to pieces.

A good twenty miles out, with his eyes glued to the road ahead, the old man spoke — for the first time.

"Left the Kay Kay sort of in a hurry, I take it."

"Well, I picked three or four chunks of lead out of the air as we caught up with 'em."

"Invited to leave, *heh?* 'Twasn't by Don Keith. He's white."

"Welsh and his two other side-kicks — Butch and Redeye. How's my friend Slim?"

Howbert spat sideways, tongued his quid, straddled the whizzing car past a bad rut, and grunted his answer.

"Seems like them pills outen your old pill-box is mighty strong med'cine. He didn't talk none. Soon's I'd let him sit in his saddle, he went and hired to the Broken Box O. All the bootleg run outen the Box when Stimpson was made foreman. He's got a purty gal. Heard tell Slim knowed her once before."

Tyrrel said nothing. He was thinking of the girl that he had known. The old man took in the drawn lines of his profile with a flickering side glance. He observed to the radiator:

"Women sure are pleasur'ble critters — when they ain't hell."

Ten miles or so farther on he asked casually:

"Which one of 'em was it, son?"

Tyrrel's slowly turning gaze met a look such as no man had ever before seen in the eyes of Jacarilla Howbert. A moment, and the old man's eyes were staring savagely ahead at the road, under down-bushed brows and a scowl. But Tyrrel had seen that look. Its like had been in the eyes of Miss Flora Macintyre at their last parting. To remain tongue-tied any longer was impossible.

"It's Gerda, dad. Welsh peddled the joke of my looking for the Aztec treasure. She couldn't stand the gaff of their laughing at me. I found what I was looking for, but I lost her. She married him before I could tell her."

"Aw . . . . shucks!" grunted the cowman. He

mouthed his quid meditatively. "Shucks. She oughtn't to've gone and done it. I knowed Mat's mammy 'fore One-Gun got her — purty as God makes 'em. We had it laid out to get hitched. I went off to the round-up. 'Long comes One-Gun with a bunch, all primed for a necktie party. Claims her pa'd been rustling his cows. She saved her pa only way she could. When I come back she was Mrs. Welsh."

After several minutes Tyrrel made his reply.

"She did it to save her father. Gerda did it to save her face."

"Mebbe — mebbe. I knowed a hound dawg once bit a man 'cause he laughed at him. Thoroughbred fillies is apt to be high strung. Talking 'bout fillies, I've knowed more'n one good'un with two brands."

Though the "two" was not emphasized, it struck Tyrrel like a forty-five bullet. The suggestion stunned him — knocked him speechless. The old man went on with his words of good cheer.

"Some of 'em, they swap owners. Others, their owners up and die — or mebbe some'un helps 'em to."

Tyrrel roused with a start.

"No. If he leaves me alone. She did it of her own free willfulness. He might have led her into it, but she could not have been driven to do it by him or anyone."

"Ain't soured on her, have you, son?"

"Dad, I'd shoot myself before I went on to my knees to her. I'd shoot him if she came on her knees to me. She'd shoot herself before she'd do that. Nothing left except for me to buckle down and work my head off for Howbert and Tyrrel."

Jacarilla placidly chewed his quid and "stepped on the gas."

They rattled into the nearest cow townlet on the railroad with a margin of five minutes. While Tyrrel bought the

tickets, Howbert arranged for the delivery of his future telegram and hired three good men to go back to the Lazy S Bar with the car. He always kept on more riders than economy called for. It was a habit acquired in the days when raids rode with or followed rustling. Before leaving the ranch he had picked the rather large force that was to make the drive with the feeders.

Tyrrel spent all the hours of the trip around to his Tabru station luxuriating in the lower berth of a Pullman stateroom. Howbert "fed his face" in the diner. But he bribed his waiter to take in a "bang-up dude dinner" to the "poor, ailing, busted-backed boy" in the stateroom.

The "busted-backed boy" hopped off the train at his home station with a whoop. The moon showed the supplies bought by him at Albuquerque, heaped at the end of the section house.

"Good thing for that cement, dad, it hasn't rained."

Howbert grunted and helped him load the truck with gasolene tanks, pieces of pump, and cases of food.

"One box of chuck busted into, but none of the pump missing," Tyrrel checked off the supplies. "Good enough. A five-spot to the section boss to stow that cement under cover, and we're off."

Moon, headlights, luck, and Tyrrel's experience on his previous trips, brought them safe through to the dead pueblo with their big load, soon after sunrise.

During the last mile Howbert nursed one of the high-power rifles and held the other between him and Tyrrel. But no bullet came whining from ruins or draw to greet them. They chugged and bumped across the "town lots," aslant the groups of "well-ventilated apartments," and dipped into the draw, brakes screeching.

The shrewd eyes of Howbert took in the shaft and squinted along the draw.

"Looks sort of like a likely hole down thataway."

"Another one just below," replied Tyrrel. "We can double the capacity of each with a little cement and rock in the gaps of the cross ledges. Both are on my homestead quarter-section."

"Quarter? Desert act gives you right to file on three-twenty."

"No bets missed, dad. I covered the wet with my homestead. Other quarters are strung out down the draw. They may beat us in the courts over the lower quarters by claiming they're irrigable and therefore not desert entry land. But a homestead is a homestead. We'll sit pretty and let 'em bore down to China. What we don't want to pump, can waste off through that crack in the limestone. It must go deep. Come down and see how it runs off aslant the draw."

They found the well exactly as Tyrrel had left it. Howbert drank deep of the cool, pure water, smacked his lips, and climbed first up out of the shaft. Tyrrel had brought pipe joints and sections to suit the situation. By noon they had the pump all set up. Howbert fetched gasolene and started the motor. It began to chug.

A few strokes — then a crystal stream gushed from the pump spout. With pick and shovel Tyrrel led the rill down the draw. A little shovel work curved it around the lower shaft.

Within two hours there was quite a pool in the first hollow. He did nothing to dam the gaps in the cross ledges. As well for the first water to run on down and puddle the bottom of the second hollow as well. After some easy dam building, they would have a pair of reservoirs large enough for all the stock the range could graze.

He spent an hour studying the lay of the ground and pacing off distances. A sudden blank silence — the normal hush of mid-afternoon at the dead town — roused him from his

absorption in hydraulic calculations. The pump had stopped chugging. He looked up towards it.

Howbert, rifle in hand, was beckoning to him. When Tyrrel came sprinting past the lower shaft, the cowman held out the other rifle.

"Reckoned it was 'bout time to look for comp'ny. One day for Mat to go to town to fix up his contest papers. T'other day to jog up over the Chupadera. He could reason'ble calc'late on finding you to home alone, or else not yet back from the Lazy S Bar if you went round thataway. That Ante hoss, son, is a hoss. Le's snuggle up under the rim of the draw."

CHAPTER XXXII

BLUFF

THE four approaching riders were all men. Three of them Tyrrel had last seen behind the muzzles of their pistols. The fourth was a stranger.

"Dep'ty sheriff, most like," said Howbert. "They're getting up in easy range. Best flag 'em."

"Not yet. There's the flat this side. No cover for them. Listen, dad."

The cowman listened, objected, and gave in.

"*Uh*—have it your own way—seeing as how mebbe he's a dep'ty."

Tyrrel laid down his rifle and rose to advance quietly towards the riders. He held up his bare hand.

Welsh checked the impulse of Redeye and Butch to dash forward. He wished time to lick his chops over the coming feast. The deputy sheriff grinned with almost equal anticipation of the fun ahead. Only a few months past he had moved from Lincoln County—by request. Using the influence of the Kay Kay, Welsh had levered him into a deputyship.

A little beyond fair pistol range from the edge of the draw, Tyrrel stopped. The four riders had already spread out. In dead silence they walked their horses forward. No less silently they closed around the man afoot. They halted and sat gloating. Tyrrel rolled a cigarette, sucked at it pensively, and blew a smoke wreath into the still air.

The wreath "got a rise" out of Welsh. He scowled and broke his silence.

"Think you can fourflush, counting on the law to protect you?"

Tyrrel spared an amused glance for the deputy and his prominently displayed badge. The fellow might have been Butch's younger brother — was, in fact, his cousin. But he was as yet only a porker, not a full-tushed boar like Butch.

"The majesty of the law — and the Welsh tin star of destiny! Why, yes, if you want to know, I am counting on the law — at least on nine points of it."

"What's that you say?"

"Possession."

Welsh laughed. The fellow was only a big boob, after all.

"I may leave you in possession of a three-by-six plot — tucked under a dirt blanket."

"Water is just the opposite of bootleg," remarked Tyrrel. "Not where it is plentiful but where it is scarce, it is most apt to make strange bedfellows."

"Don't you worry over having to double up with us. You'll have the bed all to your lonesome. Red has you covered."

"Interesting, if true. I take it, you didn't come just to pass the time of day, Mr. Welsh. What's the program?"

"Well, seeing that you may think you have a personal part to play in it, I'll remark that the first number scheduled is to beat you up good and plenty."

"Oh, Mr. Welsh! That sounds like assault and battery. Surely you'd not do that, with the majesty of the law looking on."

"He won't look on — he'll help kick your face."

"How kind! By the way, Mr. Justtin Star, pardon my curiosity. I know these other gentlemen are acquainted with him. But you yourself — have you ever had the pleasure of meeting our old-time friend Jacarilla Howbert?"

The name won a startled look from the deputy. Welsh growled at the man:

"Don't let him make a sucker of you, Bud."

"I couldn't think of doing such a thing, Bud," protested Tyrrel. "That would be a sort of contempt of court, or at least of the majesty of the law, wouldn't it? And I need all my contempt for a bunch of boobs who think I have still to cut my eye-teeth. 'Struth, Bud. They think I've ambled out here into the open like the fatted calf running to lick the boots of the prodigal son."

Welsh's eyes went bloodshot.

"You slick Dick! Whether you're lying or not——"

"No, it's Jacarilla who's doing the lying. It's snug cover, long pistol range from us, but just right for a high-power rifle. Also—easy, Mr. Welsh! Better not draw till you've taken a look at the scenery. Nice open place we've picked for our powwow."

"You son of——"

"Please, kind sir, one moment! Just look around. I should guess, from what I've heard of his rifle work, old Jacarilla could knock over about a dozen jackrabbits before they could hop to cover. Call it ten. I don't like to be charged with telling whoppers."

More than one of the four were casting furtive glances at the immediate landscape. Not a bush or stone or hollow within a hundred yards. And beyond that, on three sides, they saw plenty of cover to hide the antiquated body and modern rifle of Jacarilla Howbert, the Bogie Man of their more or less innocent early childhood. From which point of the compass would first come the crack of his rifle?

Of them all, Welsh alone never turned his eyes from Tyrrel. He tried a jeer.

"You can't pull the wool over our eyes so easy as all that. We ain't sheepherders. You couldn't have made it to the Lazy S Bar and got him up here, in the time."

"Couldn't I? What if I should lie to you that I had him

camped here when I went to file on my nice gurgling spring? Maybe I ought to have told that lie. It would spare you the strain on your believability. Truth is stranger than fiction. I came home to my homestead by way of the Lazy S Bar."

Welsh ripped out a withering blasphemy.

"Lie or no lie, you've walked into my noose. I've got you hog-tied. We're going to back-trail. You'll drift along too, if you know what's good for you."

"Guess I'm the goat," sighed Tyrrel. "The old man is pretty testy at times — as no doubt you know from past experience. I'd like to save myself. No use, though, trying. He promised to rip loose if I should go off with you. Worst of it is, I've chipped into the Lazy S Bar with my water. He hogs it all if I get into that bed you mentioned. You've known him longer than I have. Would he be apt to be too particular over what happened to me, seeing that he is my residuary legatee?"

"Dammit," growled Welsh. "How do I know it's not all a bluff?"

"Easily answered. Left hand out to the side means, please send your calling card, Jacarilla. Left hand up — or a shot — means, put 'em where they'll do the most good. Which will you have?"

"Call him on the card, Mat," suggested the incredulous Butch.

At Welsh's slight nod, Tyrrel smiled.

"All right, gents. Only don't get nervous if it winds one of you. I'm as anxious to live as you are."

He thrust his left arm out sideways. On the instant came a sharp *zip*, followed in another instant by the report of a rifle. Welsh took off his hat and looked at the crown. There was a neat hole through the peak.

"How about it?" pleasantly inquired Tyrrel. "Is it left hand up?"

"Guess that was old Hack's card, all right," admitted Welsh. "All the same, I've got a contest filed on your claim. I'm here with a deputy sheriff and his posse to take possession of my land."

"Well, what you waiting for?"

The only reply that occurred to Welsh was a curse.

"Choice language, Mr. Welsh, yet nevertheless profane. I came out here to chat, on the chance you are not that Missouri jackass after all. You know now the Lazy S Bar is in possession here. What d'you say we convert this into a peace conference, bury the hatchet, and hereafter each keep to his own side of the mesa?"

Welsh fired his big gun.

"Happens, I'm on my side now. First place, I'm contesting your homestead entry. Second place, I've leased all this range not on your filing. Go soak your head! I'm giving you notice. Don't you graze a single head of your rustled stock on my range!"

"I'll not," promised Tyrrel. "Pleasant journey!"

The failure to score rankled Welsh. As he jerked his horse around to ride off he shot a poisoned bullet.

"She's all you thought her — that wife of mine."

Tyrrel smiled and walked quietly back past the wary-eyed Butch and Redeye. But he was not smiling when he came to the edge of the draw. At sight of his face Howbert thrust out his rifle.

"Easy range yet," he grunted. "D'you want 'em all, or just Big Mat?"

"Don't shoot! It was only . . . . the skunk brought her into it."

"Well . . . . well, ain't that's where women gen'rally is when it's kissing or killing?"

With a great effort Tyrrel regained his self-control.

"I'm going in for a load of cement. I'll wire Billy Bull

to start the drive. Welsh has ordered us to keep off the grass. Claims he has leased this range."

"Mebbe he has. Only how's he going to use it without water?"

"I promised not to graze any of my rustled stock on his range. Admitting that it is his range, I don't expect to find many rustled steers to have to back-trail when the herd comes."

"Nary one single solitary head, son. I cut out that source of income years ago, after I evened up with One-Gun."

The cowman ran his hand caressingly along the barrel of his rifle.

"It'd be a pity to let all this prime grass keep on going to waste. Trot along, son, and send that wire to Billy. We ain't forgetting them nine points, *heh?* By ginger, it sort of makes me feel like old times."

The flivver truck was sounder of wind and limb than it appeared. Tyrrel chugged back by mid-afternoon of the next day with a full load of cement. Howbert had pumped enough to prove that the well could not be sucked dry.

They set to on their dam building, or rather, Tyrrel worked and made his over-willing partner keep watch and run errands. Practice in the shafts had inured him to heaving heavy slabs of limestone. To be forehanded against the coming of the herd, they pumped as fast as the gaps in the cross ledges were walled up. The first truck load of cement was all used, and Tyrrel went for a second. He wired to Albuquerque for another lot and for various other supplies.

All the time Howbert kept watch of the Chupadera through the daytime, and slept with one ear open through the night, except the many times he got up to peer around in the starlight or moonlight. That "gantered him up" almost as much as the rush work pulled Tyrrel down. But day after day dawned without the expected attack by Welsh.

Then came the happy, scorching-hot afternoon when the dry herd charged bellowing up aslant the ridges in their stampede for water. Twelve hundred and odd white-faced steers they were, some two-year-olds, but mostly yearlings. Their drinking sucked down the level of the water in the upper pool.

But now the pump did not have to be shut off at night for fear that its chugging might drown the sound of attackers. Billy Bull and the other old Lazy S Bar punchers took turns with the "Old Man" on watch, and Tyrrel had only to boss the building of the dams. The pump sucked ceaselessly night and day, sending down a constant rill that gained steadily over the drinking capacity of the steers.

As foreman of the drive, Billy Bull had arrived astride of Ante.

"Some hoss, Mr. Tyrrel," he said. "A twenty-four-jewel stem-winder. When we started, thought he mighten be stiff or win'-broke, way he sags his head. But say, he can outrun anything on four legs—'lessen it's a pronghorn."

Tyrrel gladly took over his stem-winder. He had had his fill of flivver driving. He told off one of the men to keep the truck running to and from the railroad for supplies. He also sent to Albuquerque for stone masons to heighten the upper dam and build a bigger one across the foot of the lower hollow. With the masons came a good cook, to round out the outfit.

"We don't want to let a flood overflow down the draw and wet Mr. Welsh's leased hay," remarked Tyrrel. "Soon as the dams are ready, we'll put in the larger pump that's coming, and fill both holes. Then we'll save gas by cleaning out the old well shaft and plugging up that waste-way hole. After that we can sit back and let her flow, up and over and down."

"Go to it, son. You're the doctor," said Howbert.

Tyrrel also planned a stone house. Limestone cubes and slabs lay all about and were handily shaped for wall building. The tents that he had bought were all right for rain. But better shelter would be necessary during the heavy snows of winter.

The rains still held off. All the conditions for feeding were ideal. With plenty of good water and abundance of the nutritious sun-cured standing hay close at hand, the young steers gorged themselves and began to lay on weight fast.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Welsh or his gunmen or of anyone else from the Kay Kay.

"Mebbe he glassed our outfit from the mesa top and reckoned best not to tackle us. Figgered he'd be biting off more'n he could chaw," Howbert guessed at the reason for Big Mat's reticence.

The first visit they had from the Kay Kay was by the **KK** itself. On his way down past the upper hole, one afternoon, Tyrrel noticed a rebranded yearling. Some of the Lazy S Bar two-year-olds had been bought the year before by Howbert. But almost all the yearlings were of his own raising.

For this reason, the two brands on the yearling at the water-hole caught Tyrrel's eye while he was yet many paces away. He looked closer. Below the ⊆ of the Lazy S Bar was a **KK** — exactly as he had helped rebrand the herd of yearlings at the Kay Kay ranch. When he called Howbert, the old cowman did what he himself had done — scrutinized the second brand with utmost care.

"Nope — 'tain't. Figgered they might be up to rustling tricks. 'Tain't fresh enough, though. *Hey*, you, Billy Bull. Here's a Kay Kay stray. Seed any more round?"

Billy scratched his grizzled red head.

"Kay Kay? Nussur — hol' on. Las' night I seed a dry bunch come in to tank up —'bout fifty head. Too dark to

read bran's. Jus' same, they come from the wes' an' they was pow'ful dry. They come a-runnin'."

While the foreman gave out this speculative information, a puncher came jogging to the far side of the draw. He called down across:

"*Hi*, Mr. Howb't! Bunch of Kay Kay steers 'long the ridge."

"That clinches it," said Tyrrel. "Mesa drive — Mat punched them uphill and let them slide down to us. He figures on collecting a little of our water in pay for that grass of his. The Kay Kay feeders must be getting in bad shape. Look at this one. Not much more on him, if as much, than when he left the Lazy S Bar. Well, I guess we won't miss a little water, dad."

But the old cowman did not take the matter so lightly.

"You don't reckon Big Mat's going to stop at dribbling over a handful, do you? First thing we know, that there whole herd'll be down on us, sucking up our water and eating off our grass. I'm a-going to cut out this here bunch and trail 'em back and put it up to the Kay Kay to keep their strays to home."

"That's a rather big bite-off, dad."

"Well, I reckon me and you's a pair can beat them three of a kind. Don Keith'll listen to reason. I sided his dad once. That leaves only Miss Gerdy to argify."

"You forget she is now Mrs. Welsh," said Tyrrel.

Howbert looked straight into the contracted eyes of his young partner.

"Best way to take a dose ain't to keep sipping at it, son, nor to shy off. If you got to take your med'cine, hist it up and swaller it down at a gulp."

"That may be true enough of doses. But ——"

"No buts about it! Come along with me. What you got to do is look her in the eye and grin. Nothing short of

that'll cure you. You'll find her mighty sick of her bargain, I tell you, or Big Mat ain't the son of his dad. I'm going to the Kay Kay. Ain't seed it since old Apache cashed in his checks. You coming along? Or are you feared to face a gal that throwed you?"

"It can't be any worse than it is," said Tyrrel. "I'll go."

CHAPTER XXXIII

MRS. WELSH

GRASS was still so plentiful near the water that none of the feeders were ranging far. But Tyrrel, Howbert, Billy Bull and the punchers spent the remainder of the day combing through and all around the herd. From the scattered hundreds they cut out sixty-three Kay Kay steers. Not one of the bunch bore a raw brand.

Early the next morning the partners saddled up for the drive across the mesa. Billy Bull, just off of night watch, came in grinning.

"You an' Dick 'er gonna have a han'ful, Ol' Man. New bunch o' Kay Kay's laying down 'longside the hole."

"*Huh!*" grunted Howbert. "What'd I tell you, son?"

Tyrrel did not reply until they stirred up the still-bedded new visitors.

"Pretty tough on the poor devils, back-trailing so soon," he said. "One thing, though, they've had a good drink out of it. That's the last one, dad. I make it forty-three. Over a hundred to drive. How about taking Billy along?"

Jacarilla Howbert gave a hitch to his holstered Colts, spat, and made protest:

"Aw, don't you go and spoil it, son. I was figgering we might run into a bit of real, old-time fun. I ain't looking for trouble, but mebbe Mat is. Any rooster can crow on his own dungheap. You don't want to go and get a innercent little boy like Billy into a muss, do you?"

Tyrrel looked at Billy's grizzled red head and battered face, and agreed that it would be a shame.

Nevertheless, Howbert had four of the punchers help them

drive the Kay Kays all the way across the west valley to the first herd's trail and up it to the top of the mesa. The unfatted calves were exceedingly loath to leave their new-found mess of pottage and limitless supply of unscummed water. But by the time they reached the mesa top they had been forced to realize the inevitable.

Howbert reckoned the high ground as the no-man's land between the Lazy S Bar and the Kay Kay. At any time now the fun might begin. He sent back his four vastly disappointed "innercents."

He and Tyrrel drove the laggard band on, faster than before. In anticipation at least, the fun had begun. They were across the border. But no "three of a kind" dashed out of the pines to head back the steers. No rifles cracked from the ridge crests.

The two drove steadily on, across the heights and down the west slope. Out below, at the crossing of the round-up road, they headed the band on along the herd trail towards the nearest Kay Kay water-hole. They themselves turned into the road. The fresh steers had moved far faster than the drags of Tyrrel and Gerda's desperate night drive.

The partners soon stopped to eat their cold snack. They took their time over it. When they started on, they held their horses to a walk a good part of the way. Howbert planned to reach the ranch at sundown, when the laws of hospitality would compel an invitation for the visitors to stay over night, no matter how unwelcome they might be to the Kay Kay.

But in the final quarter-mile they put their horses into a gallop that wound up in a burst of racing speed. At the last moment they came to a slithering halt in the angle between the horse corral and the rear corner of the stable. Riders coming at top speed are not so easy to shoot as if walking or jogging their horses. For the same reason, both riders

reined up in such position that when they flung themselves out of their saddles each had his horse between him and the stable.

No one was in sight. But the clattering approach of the visitors evidently had attracted attention. The rear door of the stable began slowly to creak open. Howbert grinned with anticipation.

From the half open door limped, not Welsh or Butch or Redeye, but old Jake. As usual, he was on duty. Tyrrel's eyes glowed at sight of the lame little wrangler. He sang out affectionate greeting:

"'Lo, parson. Looking for black sheep?"

"*Heh—heh!* Well, I'll be gosh—great Jumpin' Jee-hoss-*ee-fat!* If 'tain't Hack How. *Heh! heh!* Well, well, well! I'll be gosh-rotted twice! Well, well, Hack, you old keg o' sour pickles! 'Member that time me and you and 'Pache cleaned out the Mescalero renegades, up in the——"

"Ain't lost your tongue, Jake—leastways not more'n two-three yards of it," broke in Howbert. "Dick and me wouldn't mind cleaning up some chuck, if 'tain't t'other side a peck of cattriges."

"*Heh*—if it's Butch and Red you're skeered of, you poor, broken-down, miser'ble old tenderfoot, they's not to home. Big Mat's had 'em north, line riding, a couple weeks. Get down on your sinful old marrer bones and thank your lucky stars you didn't meet-up with them fire-eaters. They'd 'a' et you alive, horn, hoof, 'n' hair. Why, them feerocious lobos——"

Tyrrel was in no mood for chaffing. He had come to go through with the ordeal and be done. He asked sharply:

"Family home?"

"Yeppe, kid—Mr. Tyrrel. Donnie, he told me all 'bout you busting into that there water. Don't mind saying I'm gosh-rotted dee-lighted—hold on. Don't you bother.

Lemme off-saddle 'em both. Just you toddle along and get it."

Howbert grunted dejectedly as he and Tyrrel made for the *casa*.

"Ought to've knowed it'd be bad luck bringing back them steers. Thirty-forty year ago I'd 'a' blotted the brand and stirred up a leetle fun. As 'tis, we ain't even met-up with them lobo fire-eaters."

Tyrrel said nothing. He was thinking of his last departure from the Kay Kay — though not of the final dash from the stable in front of the three blazing pistol muzzles. His thoughts were all upon the far more bitter parting in the *patio* with — Mrs. Welsh.

In the outer courtyard he led Howbert direct to the gate of the garden. After some little time his ring brought the housemaid. She gave the old man only a half glance. Her eyes fixed upon Tyrrel, wide with utter wonderment.

This time there was no gayness in his heart or jest upon his lips. He gravely raised his hat.

"Miss Janet, permit me to introduce my partner Mr. Howbert. We have come to see the owners of the Kay Kay on a matter of business."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Thank you, Mr. Howbert," murmured the flustered maid. "They are in the drawing room, sirs. Please to come right in. Thank you."

The old habit of wariness, as much as curiosity, kept the cowman's glance darting all around as they passed into the *patio* and around the fountain and on across the veranda. Tyrrel looked only at the bed of American Beauty roses. There was no sign now of Gerda's trampling. Every broken stem had been pruned off. New shoots were springing up in response to careful watering and fertilizing. Women sure were "queer critters."

In the doorway of the *sala* the still-flustered maid an-

nounced the visitors without a word of forewarning. Tyrrel, first named, stepped in ahead of his partner.

The family were at the far end of the big room, listening to a new batch of phonograph records. Welsh whirled to face the outer door, his hand at his hip. Keith stood up rather dazedly, for once in his life disconcerted. Pilar clasped her hands, and then, with a half frightened glance at Gerda, darted across to meet Tyrrel. She left the record playing. It was *Isolde's Love-Death* from Wagner's opera, *Tristan and Isolde.*

Of all the astonished four, Tyrrel saw only Gerda. Unlike the others, she sat perfectly still. Across the *sala,* in the fading light of sunset, he could not be sure that her face lost color. Her utter stillness was the last thing that he had expected.

Pilar danced up to him, her black eyes beaming with affection and delight. Her outflung hands compelled his attention.

"*Buenos dias, mi querido amigo!*" she greeted.

"*Con Dios, chiquita!*" he replied, and he kissed her, first on one cheek and then upon the other.

Jacarilla Howbert grunted and waddled across the polished floor, no more abashed than if the richly furnished *sala* had been a hotel lobby.

"'Scuse us dropping in on you folks so suddenlike," he drawled. "Guess your hired gal got the loop twisted. My side-pard told her we come on business. Wanted she should steer us to the office. I don't mind, though, seeing the old parlor again. Beats all how womenfolks like dewdads, Miss Gerdy. You got your comp'ny room slicked up a damsi—durnsight more ornymental than 'twas last time I seen your pa to home."

Gerda had risen. She came forward ahead of her brother, a quietly smiling hostess, all cordial graciousness without a trace of hauteur or condescension. She took the old man's

skinny hand in a hearty clasp.

"I am my dad's daughter, Mr. Howbert. You're very welcome to the ranch he left us — you and your ——"

"My pard. He's come into the Lazy S Bar on a third basis — same's Mat busted into the Kay Kay."

Of all present, none was more surprised than Tyrrel. It had been understood that he was to own a share in the Lazy S Bar, but no definite amount or proportion had been fixed. The old man's outfit was as big as the Kay Kay. At the best, Tyrrel had counted only upon a fifth interest in the feeders brought to the new range, and half of the future calves, if his partner should choose to shift any cows from his old range.

With an odd masked look at Welsh, Gerda left Howbert shaking hands with her brother and went past him to greet his partner. Pilar shrank a little and drew around half behind Tyrrel's shoulder. But her cousin did not even appear to see her. She gazed at Tyrrel with inscrutable eyes, her red lips ever so slightly curved in what might have been the beginning of a smile.

"You look fit, Dick, though a bit pulled. Must have fallen off ten or twelve pounds. Dinner is about to be served. We'll eat first, and talk over your business afterwards."

"Our clothes, Mrs. Welsh. We did not expect ——"

Her lips tightened at his unhesitating use of the name.

"Mrs. Welsh is still the daughter of Apache Keith. When I ask visitors to dine with us I mean it. Your clothes don't matter. It's not your hat but what's under it that counts. But you'll wish to freshen up. Janet, please show Mr. Tyrrel and Mr. Howbert upstairs. Put them in one of the — no, the wing is still all torn up. They will have Miss Chavez' suite for the night."

"But — but we couldn't think of turning Pilar out!" stammered Tyrrel. "Bunks or the hay loft will do just as

well — or better."

"If you'll kindly go right up. We do not wish the soup to cool."

"Lord, no," agreed Howbert. "I ain't too proud to eat spoon-vittles, if you ain't got reg'lar food."

Upstairs, in the middle of Pilar's boudoir, he stared around, as wild-eyed as a renegade steer in the branding chute.

"Gee-inger!" he hoarsely whispered. "Looks jus' like a purty gal at a hoe-down in one them pink-lace *mantilla* things and white slippers. D'you figger we should oughta take off our boots?"

"Well, we might when we go to bed, if you think it's necessary," said Tyrrel.

Howbert looked in at the dainty carved bedstead. It was bare of everything except the box springs.

"*Huh.* That ain't so worse," he grunted. "I was feared they was going to bed us down in one them goose-hair smotheroons."

Each suite of rooms in the main *casa* had been piped with modern plumbing. As he lathered his face and hands and hair with the delicately scented soap, the old man chuckled.

"Ranch house, *heh!* Plumb ridic'lous — reg'lar dude hostelry. What d'you s'pose Mat thought of it when he first signed the register?"

"What's he thinking now, dad?"

"You can't prove it by me. Mebbe, though, I might make a guess. You see him reach for it?"

"Couldn't have been that, dad. He wasn't expecting us. He'd not be packing a gun in the family circle."

"Mebbe not. Mebbe 'twas t'other kind that kicks worser and kills more partic'pants than innercent bystanders. Mat was weaned on that kind of bottle."

Tyrrel said nothing but thought hard. What did it all mean? Not even a mattress on Pilar's bed; Gerda as gracious

as a day in June; and Welsh — whatever the weapon in his hip pocket — showing unmistakable signs of drink. Like most men of his class, he of course had to have his liquor, regardless of the laws of his country. But never before had he shown the after-effects of a spree.

The cowman would as soon have looted a jeweler's shop as touch any article of Pilar's exquisite toilet set. He borrowed his partner's pocket comb to rake the tangles out of his wet gray hair. While waiting for him in the boudoir, Tyrrel looked at Pilar's little shrine. It occupied a niche that had been left in the thick wall for such purpose when the *casa grande* was built, a century or more past.

Below the beautiful statuette of Virgin and Child stood the ancient altar pieces that he had brought from the ruined pueblo — chalice, bell, crucifix, and candlesticks. All were brightly polished, and the mashed candlestick had been fairly well restored to shape. Both it and its mate held votary wax candles. Beside the little crucifix lay Pilar's old crucifix-handled dagger.

Down in the *sala* they found the young girl rather subdued, and Welsh more lowering than before. But Keith was no less cordial, and Gerda still more gracious. Dinner was waiting. She gave the visitors the places on either side of her. Her brother sat opposite, as usual, to carve. Pilar was at Tyrrel's left; Welsh between Keith and his old enemy of the Lazy S Bar. If any other arrangement could have been thought of more exasperating to a husband, Tyrrel could not conjecture it.

One thing alone was clear to him: Mrs. Welsh was not on the best of terms with Mr. Welsh. During the meal he had ample confirmation of the fact. Without for a moment losing her gracious manner, Gerda tormented Welsh with ironical subtlety.

She made Tyrrel give in detail his reasons for expecting

to find the hidden water. He was too modest to tell how he had been able to fetch Howbert in time to hold possession of his claim. But the old man was only too ready to "crack up" what his young partner had done.

He bragged about Tyrrel's record long-distance ride over the Chupadera. He admired his planning of the dams beforehand, so that there would be no delay in trailing the feeders to the new range. He added that the steers were laying on beef hand-over-fist.

This last "got a rise" out of Welsh. The dark red of his face became still darker. He broke his morose silence.

"I'll law all that beef out of your hides," he promised. "It's my leased land you're grazing. You lied to me, Tyrrel. You agreed to keep your cattle off my range."

"I agreed not to graze any rustled cattle on your grass. In the first place, I have only your word that it is your range. In the second place, I have my partner's word that none of our stock have been rustled."

"We got nine points of the law," chimed in Howbert. "If you want to try out the other point, sue and be da-urned. We got a come-back on you — a double come-back. A hun'erd head of them feeders I sold the Kay Kay drifted in to suck up our water. They come back with us over the mesa."

Keith could not hide his astonishment.

"Our steers could not possibly have ranged across the mesa."

"Not without being shoved. Question is, who done the shoving?"

"Must have been a burro, Mr. Howbert," said Gerda. "Anyone with a grain of sense would have known better."

She looked towards Welsh as if for confirmation. He smiled with sardonic mirth.

"We've got only his word and Tyrrel's for it, Mrs. Welsh.

If any Kay Kay steers saw the other side of the mesa—which I doubt—like as not the men that shoved them across expected to do some Lazy S Bar brand-blotting, but lacked the nerve. I'll add that if any of our cattle have or do get over there, they are on their own range. Nobody has a right to back-trail them."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," admitted Howbert. "Only thing, I kind of cherish a sort of liking for the progeny of Apache Keith. Furthermore, I don't like to see good cattle famish for lack of water. I'm notifying you now, if any more strays cross the mesa, they's going to be a hog-proof fence round our water-holes, and the ticket of admission ain't going to be a Kay Kay. That settles the business end of our visit, and——"

"Tyrrel, do you stand for that?" asked Keith.

"By no means. I——"

"No argifying, son," broke in Howbert. "The majority of the Lazy S Bar votes aye. Matter is settled. Mighty nice pie you bake, Miss Gerdy."

At the end of the meal Welsh left without a word. Gerda promptly abandoned Tyrrel to Pilar, and devoted her evening to Howbert. She kept at him to tell over his experiences in company with her father when the West was still really wild.

Keith sat apart, absorbed in thought. Pilar told Tyrrel that he was worrying about the feeders. The only offer for them that he had been able to get had been ruinously low.

"And the rains still hold off, *Don* Ricardo. The best of our water-holes are now little more than scum and slime and mud."

Tyrrel looked across the *sala* at his partner and Gerda.

"If only Welsh were out of it," he muttered. "I might be able to do something."

CHAPTER XXXIV

FAIR MEANS AND FOUL

WELSH did not come to the *sala* at any time that evening. Gerda and Pilar retired rather early. After a cigar with Keith, the partners also went to turn in. On the dainty bedstead they now found a double mattress, snowy sheets, and a lace-edged satin coverlet.

Howbert recoiled from that object of terror. He pulled off his boots and bedded down on the polished floor in a Navajo rug, with the boots for pillow. Tyrrel had the bed to himself. Wrapped about in luxury, he lay awake half the night to the tune of his partner's snoring. What was it about Gerda and Welsh?

Wakefulness routed him out at peep of day. As he tiptoed from the younger girl's boudoir to go downstairs, he heard the sonorous voice of Gerda through the thickness of the massive door across the corridor. She was calling upon Pilar to get up.

To speed the guests on their return journey, breakfast was served very early. Neither Pilar nor Welsh appeared. The only thing notable about the meal was Gerda's continued graciousness and her brother's absorption.

When the time came for them to see their guests off, Tyrrel somehow found himself with Gerda behind the others. She had suddenly fallen silent. Out in the garden, beside the bed of American Beauties, she paused.

"Look," she murmured. "Some are still in bloom. What do you think of them?"

Tyrrel choked down the lump in his throat.

"They are as glorious and as thorny as ever."

She reached down and broke off the stem of a great half-blown bud. She held it out to Tyrrel. He edged back.

"Glory Girl! Those thorns — you should not have done it! And I cannot accept. You are — Mrs. Welsh."

"As a memento of the past, Dick."

He took the fragrant crimson gift in a hungry grasp. She opened the white hand that had broken off the stem. The piercing thorns had reddened her palm to a crimson like that of the bud.

"Yes," she murmured. "I am Mrs. Welsh. I am not apt to forget the fact. No less is the fact apt to remain true. I took him for better or for worse. I am now a Welsh, but I'm not a welcher — if you'll forgive the pun. I pledged myself until death — my death or his!"

Her eyes suddenly flamed with the passion that seethed within her.

"You two!" she cried. "Call yourselves men! He let you slip through his clumsy fingers. You ran!"

"Like a scared jackrabbit, Mrs. Welsh."

"Oh, I know. Donnie told me. It was for Pilar — that sly little . . . . but don't be too sure. She might be willing to take you — out of spite . . . . only she'll not have the chance. You're mine — you know it! You're mine till you die or I die!"

Tyrrel crushed the half-flown bud in his hand. He tore it off and flung down the stem.

"Keep that part. I'll keep this," he said.

With the crushed bud still clutched tight in his hand, he went on around the path, leaving her standing beside the old fountain, with the roseless, thorny stem at her feet.

Old Jake waited at the inner gate with the horses of the guests. An "*Adios!*" from Keith, and the partners were jogging off on their return trip.

Three miles or more along their way, Howbert skewed

himself sideways to bush his eyebrows at his stern-faced companion.

"Well, son, didn't it work all hunkydory? You went and done it like a little man. You come and looked her square in the eye. Feel a heap better now, don't you?"

"If you want to know, dad, I feel like—murder!"

"Nope—not that. It ain't sensiblelike. You always want to make it self-defense. If you get another chance, just give him first draw. He's slower'n 'lasses in January. What you choking in your fist?"

Tyrrel looked down and realized that he was still clutching the rose. He thrust it into the left pocket of his shirt.

"It's only a crushed something that was and now isn't, dad."

"*Huh*—what you hanging onto it for, then?"

Several miles farther along he added:

"Seeing as how it's busted and done for, why in the name of Sam Hill don't you put your rope on the leetle gal? Sheep money ain't so disrep'table that it won't buy cows."

"That's it. Why don't I?" Tyrrel asked himself. "Why can't a man be as sensible as a burro—take grass when he can't get oats? Nice tasty grass full of posies! Only trouble . . . . supposing you still could get your hoof up on the rail, dad—how would you like the barkeep to shove you a violet ice cream soda just after you'd climbed outside three fingers of real, old, bottled-in-bond snake-medicine?"

At the end of another mile, when they left the round-up road and turned up the cattle-trail, Howbert thought he saw the way out for his partner.

"Look yonder on the ridge, son. It's a-coming to meet you. Easy as rolling off a log. I'll take care of the pair of black Jacks. All you got to do is tell him you don't like the cut of his ears—'specially that Lazy S Bar notch under the

patch he wears. Let him get his gun clean outen its holster, so's they can't be no doubt of it being self-defense."

Tyrrel's eyes clouded with regret.

"Self-defense, dad? You're right about his being slow. I saw him draw on you. I could let him drag it clear out and up, and still get him. Self-defense? It would be cold-blooded murder."

"*Uh* — ain't you putting it purty strong? I'd 'a' figgered it leastways was sort of lukewarm. Don't you disremember he's the son of One-Gun Welsh. Sooner or later he's going to get you, if you don't get him first. He's tried two-three times a'ready."

"No use your talking," said Tyrrel. "Can't you see how I'm hog-tied? It would not be because he deserved it, but because I wanted her . . . . I do want her. I'd shoot off my hand to get her. But I'll not pull leather. It's going to be a clean win, or none at all. I don't want Mat Welsh's wife. I want the woman my Glory Girl is going to be when she's gentled."

"*Um-m-m!*" sighed Howbert of the Jacarillas. But hope flickered again in his saddened eyes. "What if I — *uh* — what if he starts the shindy?"

"That would make it real self-defense. But it would just as surely lose her to me. She must herself come to realize — look! It's all off now, anyway."

The three distant riders on the ridge top had separated. Two rode back down the trail on the far side at top speed. The other came on slowly.

"Big Mat's sure got his gall with him," said Howbert. "Counts on us passing him up 'cause he's alone. But why in thunder did he head back Red and Butch for?"

"You've told it. He knows we'll not touch him by himself."

When they neared the approaching rider he stopped and dismounted to tighten his cinch. His horse swung crossways

of the trail. As the other horses started to go around, Welsh stepped in front of them. He met Howbert's hostile stare and Tyrrel's curt nod with a show of bluff cordiality that did not go with the look in his bloodshot eyes.

"Morning, gentlemen! Don't happen to have the makin's, do you?"

Howbert fingered his plug of chewing tobacco, and put it back. Tyrrel tossed down a half-full sack of Durham.

"Keep it," he said. "I have another. Good morning."

But Welsh still stood blocking the way, the smile on his thin lips belying the glint in his eyes.

"Sorry I missed the pleasure of the evening with you. Came out to tell the boys not to let any more strays drift up the mesa. I'm willing to wait for the courts to decide it."

"Meaning, you lay down?" inquired Howbert.

"No, by — I mean, I'm going to fight you to a finish — but it'll be in the courts. I own up I've pulled off some pretty rough stuff on Tyrrel. But I've come to see things his way. It's not like the days of our dads. Besides, I don't want to get my partners into a muss. How about it, Tyrrel?"

"Suits me. Now, if you'll excuse us, we'll be on our way."

The forward thrust of Ante compelled Welsh to step aside before he could reply. Tyrrel rode off without so much as a glance over his shoulder. But Howbert had been bred in the good old times when men like Welsh did not hesitate to shoot enemies in the back. He slued half around in his saddle and made a casual query about the Kay Kay grass and the prospects of rain.

Welsh did not answer. He was already swinging into his saddle. He galloped off homewards.

"Son," observed the old cowman, "I segashyate we been held up. Question now before the meeting is, why for?"

Ante quickened his pace up the slope of the ridge on which the "three of a kind" had separated. The crest gave view

of a long stretch of trail ahead. But Redeye and Butch had disappeared. Tyrrel gazed dreamily at the landscape.

"What d'you say, dad? Strikes me that arroyo here below offers a nice private chute up into the ravine south of the trail draw. Colonel Cody once told me it was a good idea in Indian country to make your back trip by another trail."

"Bill said a mouthful when he said that. Shouldn't wonder a-tall if they's a couple purty boys behind them far rocks a-going to miss something."

In the hollow between the ridge and the next rise, the partners turned off the herd trail and plunged into the gravelly bed of the arroyo. Almost at once Howbert pointed to fresh tracks among the many wind-blurred older ones.

"One hoss going up last evening — bar acrost the off hind shoe. Same hoss down since sun-up, 'long with two more. We ain't the first to use the ladies' entrance, son."

Tyrrel put Ante into a lope. After half a mile he stopped to climb the steep side of the arroyo and peer over the edge. The rocks of which Howbert had spoken were no more than fair rifle-shot away. The trail ran along their far side. Tyrrel could see nothing of Butch or Redeye. But two saddled horses stood tied to the thorny greasewood shrubs in an angle between the ledges.

He rode after Howbert, who had continued to follow the horse tracks. The arroyo curved around and up into a ridge-rimmed bowl, at the foot of the steep ravine in the wall of the mesa. Scattered about the hollow were over two hundred head of young white-faces. Their fine condition struck Howbert no less quickly than Tyrrel.

"'Pears like they's been getting better grass and water than them other Kay Kays we trailed home, son. Mebbe a leetle tank at the gully foot big enough for the bunch. They look flourishing as our own feeders. Mighty good stock,

them white-faces, when you give 'em half a — Gee-roos-lum! Lookut that brand!"

Most of the young steers were scattering off to the left. But one had lingered to stare wide-eyed at the riders. Tyrrel was already unbuckling his rope. Within a quarter of a minute he had the steer thrown and hog-tied. They had no need to look close at the **KK** below the old, hairy, growth-magnified ⊆. The burn of the iron was still raw.

They freed the captive and bunched enough of the others to convince themselves that the **KK**'s of all were fresh branded.

"Purty slick!" said the reputed one-time rustler. "Purty slick! If only he'd 'a' headed Butch and Red out round us, 'stead of back, he'd 'a' had no slip-up. Purty slick! Each trip 'crost the mesa they took a bunch of Kay Kays over, and fetched back twice as many Lazy S Bars. In another month it's been mighty hard to sift out the rustled ones from their herd."

"Mr. Keith and Gerda had no hand in this!"

Howbert did not even trouble to nod, the fact was so obvious.

"Question is how best to cinch it on 'em. Easy enough to slip back and bushwhack them bushwhackers. After that we can chase over the mesa and get our boys and come back for Mat."

"We'll take 'em alive, dad — and take 'em in to the Kay Kay."

"*Uh-uh* — not by a little bit. We don't know how many of their outfit is siding 'em. Le's go. Mayn't be healthy here'bouts."

Rifles in hand, they raced back down the arroyo. Opposite the rocks they dismounted. There was no cover for horses between the arroyo and the rocks. From the top of the bank they saw the horses of the liers-in-wait just going

down over the west end of the rock comb.

Wary against an ambush, they worked their way forward from bush to bush. As they neared the rocks they crawled still more cautiously, with rifles half raised. But no bullets came pinging at them from the ledges. At the last was a fifty-yard open stretch. Howbert covered with his rifle, while Tyrrel made the dash.

Cowboy boots are not built for sprinting, yet Tyrrel made the fifty yards reasonably close to record time. He dropped in the shelter of the first ledge, steadied himself with a few deep breaths, and bounded up the ledges to the crest.

His first darting glance failed to see man or horse. It swept out around from the opposite base of the rocks. Down the trail, half a mile away, two horsemen were loping over the rise on the near side of the arroyo valley. Without stopping to think, he flung up his rifle and fired.

Howbert leaped up on the crest beside him just as the riders raced from view down the far side of the rise.

"Shucks!" he cried. "You shouldn't oughta done that."

"You're right. We could have cut down the gully and overtaken them within a mile or two, dad."

"Caught 'em sneaking up the arroyo, you mean. They was going to see where we'd gone to. Now they're hitting for home. Run and fetch our hosses. We got to trail along our ownselves. They can't get away with the evidence on short notice, but mebbe they can jump the country. We got to get the wires hot, telling four-five sheriffs all about it."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE CARCASS DELICIOUS

BY HARD riding, the partners reached the camp at Tabru soon after the noon hour. Tyrrel wrote the telegrams as dictated by the old cowman. They sent Billy Bull loping off with the messages on the best horse of his mount. He had orders to wait at the railroad for answers to all the telegrams.

Close upon sundown one of the incoming range riders saw a strange horseman slanting across the west valley. When he reported this Tyrrel himself went up out of the draw to look. The visitor had reached the near slope.

Tyrrel found his partner at the lower dam, as deeply engrossed in examining the stone work as if he had never heard of a rustler.

"It's coming along, son. That bonus is making 'em sweat. It's coming along right smart."

"So is something else, dad. There's a hat on the west slope that may belong to a Mexican *vaquero*, but I doubt it."

Equally puzzled, they hastened up to their own tent. Keith had pushed his horse. Very soon he came loping aslant the hill top. He drew rein before the partners, beaming with all the geniality of his nature.

"*Buenos dias, amigos!* Look at that pump-stream! *Poder de Dios!* And water, not slime! Lead me to it. I'm dry as a fish!"

"She'll be throwing more'n double that, soon's we get the dams fixed," said Howbert. "Step right in. Bucket and dipper all ready."

Inside the bosses' tent the visitor drank a full quart of the

cool pure water, rinsed his bald head, and sat down on a canned-goods case to fan himself with his hat. He smiled at Tyrrel's grave face.

"You can guess what I have come for, Dick."

"Well, no, I can't say I do."

"Think of Pilar. That may jog your memory. She did not tell me what you said until she came down, a good two hours after you left. I followed you as soon as I had a talk with Gerda."

"Oh, yes — about your feeders."

Howbert turned upon Tyrrel with a look that would have made most men cringe.

"What's that? You double-crossing me?"

"No, no, Mr. Howbert!" interposed Keith. "It was only that if Mat were out of it ——"

"Out the Kay Kay?"

"Yes. I've had my hands tied. Gerda has been backing him against me. But now — I can't make that girl out, to save me! First furious for, then dead against!"

"Takes after her dad," grunted Howbert. "Apache hated hard likker like pizen, but if hell wasn't popping 'long some other line, he just nachelly had to go on a bust to keep the dust from settling."

"Well, Gerda is on one now — or rather, on the war-path. She says, if Welsh does not wipe up the earth with your outfit within the week, he goes out of the Kay Kay, and she stays in."

Tyrrel could not restrain his astonishment.

"You mean, they will — separate?"

"Separate! Didn't Pilar tell you? It's never been anything else. Right at the first she refused to live with him until he — unless he rode you. Now you know why he tried so hard to kill you at the stable, the day of their marriage."

A flood of elation, of exultance, of intense joy, surged up

within Tyrrel. His girl — his Glory Girl! He could still think of her as his own! That marriage had been only an empty form. She was Welsh's wife only in name.

But close upon the taste of honey came the dash of bitter gall. She had given him her answer to the old question, "What's in a name?" A Welsh who was not a welcher — a wife in name alone, yet pledged until death! If release came to her before death, her husband must be the one to give it. The stronger her love urged her towards freedom, the more stubbornly her pride would block the way.

Keith had paused for another dipperful of water.

"The point now is, he must throw you within the week, or get out. I will raise the money to pay him his third, even if I have to borrow from Pilar's trust fund. What riled Gerda was that while I was talking with Pilar, he came in and told of his pleasant meeting with you on the road."

"They's a leetle story 'bout that, too, Donnie," chuckled Howbert. "It'll keep, though. Go on. I gather as how Miss Gerdy boiled over."

"Not at first, but while we were talking about what Pilar had told me. It was then, as I was about to leave, that Gerda saw him talking with that savory pair of his. She went out and gave him his time limit for making good."

Howbert grinned at his silent partner.

"What d'you reckon? Is he going to make it forget-me-nots or everlastings?"

"You may surmise from my coming what I believe the outcome will be," went on Keith. "I thought I'd be forehanded. My understanding is that Dick told Pilar he would try to help the Kay Kay if we rid ourselves of Mat."

"I'll be only too glad to do what I can, Mr. Keith," replied Tyrrel. "But of course it is for Mr. Howbert to decide. He owns the controlling interest in our partnership. I was counting on my knowledge that he's white and square as they

make 'em, and that he has nothing against the son and daughter of Apache Keith."

"What's the proposition?" Howbert grunted at the visitor.

"I would like to haggle with you for a bargain, Mr. Howbert, but I can't even make a bluff. There's no market for those feeders of ours, and we have no more than grass enough to carry over our other cattle, even if the rains set in at once. All I can do is throw up my hands and leave it to you."

"Meaning, you want we should graze all them feeders?"

"Yes."

"*Uh-h*—where we going to get the grass? According to Mat, this here's all his leased range. S'pose you kick him out the Kay Kay, he'll have a big wad of cash, you say. S'pose he gets a injunction and comes round with a bunch of dep'ty gunmen?"

Keith's face fairly beamed.

"We'll be the ones to get that injunction. Mat slipped up when he took out the lease in his own name, instead of using a dummy. During the life of our partnership agreement, all interests related to the cattle business acquired by any member of the Kay Kay become partnership assets—and they stay with the outfit, whoever withdraws."

"Looks kind of like you got a mule ready to back up against Mat. Mebbe we got a couple hun'erd mules. What'd you say if I told you they's a bunch of Lazy S Bar steers over on your side the mesa toting new Kay Kay brands?"

"Why—of course there are—a thousand."

"I'm talking 'bout a bunch with fresh brands—raw brands."

Off came Keith's spectacles. He wiped them, mopped his head, wiped the glasses again, put them on, and stared incredulously.

"You're joking!"

"Reckon Mat'll think it a left-handed joke 'fore we get done with him."

"Mat?"

Tyrrel told in a few words about the meeting with Welsh, the move to avoid the assassins, the finding of the rustled steers, and the flight of the gunmen.

At the end of the brief recital, Keith rinsed off his head with a dipperful of the cool water and wiped his glasses for the third time.

"I—I couldn't have believed it possible. He has always been as straight as he was hard-headed—until this. It must be the double rasp of his old enmity towards you, Mr. Howbert, and the newer hate for Dick."

"That started when Dick out-roped and out-rode him at the rodeo. Sure riled the big cuss a-plenty. Would 'a' thought, though, even the son of One-Gun couldn't 'a' been so ornery 'bout losing first money."

"Not the money. It of course was, and is, my sister. She is partly to blame. Well—she is paying for it—paying terribly, poor girl. But about Mat—are you absolutely certain? It does not seem possible he would take such a risk. Could it not have been those two and someone else—that deputy he brought over here to bluff Dick?"

The old man bared his few scraggy teeth in a sardonic grin.

"Reckon the court'll take my testimony as a qualified expert on rustling. Wouldn't take it to court, though—we got evidence enough to hold a necktie party—only Dick, he ain't going to allow no carcass delicious."

"You mean, *corpus delicti*, don't you?"

"Mebbe it's *hab'us carcass*. 'Sall the same in Dutch. Anyhow, he ain't going to let it get betwixt him and Miss Gerdy. Savvy?"

Keith looked Tyrrel straight in the eye.

"I did not take you for the kind to play fast and loose, Dick? How about Pilar?"

"She's a mighty sweet little girl, Mr. Keith. I have thought of her some. Who could help it? But it mostly has been as a brother. Trouble with you, it's been as a gran'dad. You're a fish if you don't want her, and you're acting like one if you do want her."

"She is only seventeen. I am thirty-three — and look at my head."

"What of it? Cæsar was bald when he conquered Gaul. Try a little gall yourself."

"The worst of it, Dick, she is a Catholic and my cousin."

"No, only half cousin. I remember she raised the point. You could get a dispensation. Man alive, the way you've been 'my childing' her, it sounded like you meant it. Tell her you're feeling like a boy and you want her to mother you. If you're going to play the game, go in to win. Don't forget, even a fish has a backbone."

"Which remembers me, we got salt mack'rel for supper," put in Howbert. "I seen the cook bust a keg. Le's go get it."

The bosses had a separate mess, not because the owners of the Lazy S Bar were developing aristocratic tastes, but because, with the stone masons to seat, room was lacking at the regular table. During the meal the partners and their guest discussed all the plans they could think of for getting more evidence of Welsh's guilt.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A SLIVER OF STEEL

AFTER the departure of Keith for Tabru there had been an attempted revolt at the Kay Kay ranch. Redeye possessed a little imagination, and, unlike Butch, he had never been beaten to a pulp by Welsh.

He was out in the corral, saddling his horse, when Welsh followed him from the *casa* with Butch.

"Here, what you think you're doing?" demanded Welsh.

Redeye warily swung the horse around between them and gave another heave on his cinch.

"If you want to know, I'm a-going to hit out. I'm a-going to hit out while the going's good."

Butch squinted at his own corraled horse and started to take the rope from his saddle, on the top rail of the fence.

"Put it back," ordered Welsh. "You, Red — take that saddle off."

With the end of his cinch-strap half hitched in its ring, Redeye sought to spar.

"I just got to leave, Mat. You best fade away too. It ain't going to be healthy round here no more. I tell you, Jacarilla must 'a' run 'cross them steers. Why else'd he've sneaked round and took that crack at us? He'll tell Glass-Eyes, and Glass-Eyes is sore at you — like Miss Gerdy. They won't stand up for their own outfit. They'll raise a rumpus — try to throw us. And Jacarilla a-top all the rest! 'Scuse me! I'm on my way!"

Welsh jeered:

"Great hand I hold! Drew for three jacks, and was dealt three two-spots! Talk about nervy gun-toters — Slim quit,

you quitting, and Butch ready to quit!"

"Don't you call us quitters, Mat. We ain't got no stake in the game. You got stacks of blue chips in the jackpot. We ain't got a single solitary white chip — and there's Jacarilla!"

"*Bah.* He ain't the devil. A steel-jacket rifle bullet will drop him quick as anybody else. I took you on and kept you on at good wages, loafing round here all this time. Now, just when I can use you, you try to quit. How would a thousand strike you? Cash down as soon as we get Jacarilla?"

"You — you'd go after *him?*"

"What else?"

The big man's jaw came together like a steel trap. His lips thinned in a grim smile. As Redeye had said, he had stacks of blue chips wagered on the game — all the many thousands that he had put into the Kay Kay, all his chances of revenge upon Howbert and Tyrrel, all his hopes of winning his wife to be his wife.

Flight might possibly save him from the penitentiary. But flight would spell confession. He would become a hunted fugitive, without fortune or friends. That was far worse than the risk of death while fighting for his all. The thing for a bulldogger to do is take the bull by the horns.

"I'm going to get that old wolf, Red — and you and Butch are going along. Take your choice. The chance to win a thousand, or ——"

"Fat chance!" muttered Butch.

"Fatter than your chance to get out of this corral alive if you quit on me."

Welsh was in earnest and looked it.

"What's your layout?" Redeye grumbled his submission.

"First, we'll go look. You pair of scared rabbits didn't stop to see which side they turned off the road. Instead of

going up the arroyo, they may have swung to the left. Plenty of cover there. It's reasonable to suppose they came back at you, not because they found the steers, but because old Hack suspected the trap and circled till he saw your horses. If they didn't find the steers, all we need do is keep the bunch hid till the hair starts growing."

The possibility enheartened both would-be quitters. They rode off with their master almost in good spirits. But the cheerfulness lasted only until they reached the arroyo. One look at the tracks in the bed of the arroyo told the story. Redeye turned green.

Welsh was the son of his father. He forced his companions to trail with him all the way up to the bowl, so that he might make absolutely certain. Then, at Redeye's nervous suggestion that they strike southeast across the mesa for Lincoln County, he burst into grim laughter.

"It ain't so funny as all that," said Butch. "You can't get away with rustling so easy now'days. They'll give us five to ten years in the pen."

"Us?" Welsh affected great astonishment. "What d'you mean — us? Get wise. Don't you savvy we've got 'em where we want 'em? Roped, hog-tied, sewed up in a sack! They came to the ranch to put in a complaint about the Kay Kay drifting feeders in on their range — which is my range. They tell about back-trailing those steers home to us."

"'Struth," said Butch. "I seen the whole bunch heading for the upper water-hole."

"You did not," contradicted Welsh. "Here's the bunch they brought — Lazy S Bar feeders, branded **KK** by Slick Dick and the Sneaky Snake, and planted on our range so they can go and swear out a perjured charge of rustling against me."

Butch stared, mouth agape. Redeye was nimbler of wit.

"Judas!" he gasped.

"Here's the three of us to swear to it," went on Welsh. "Three against their two. Haven't we found their tracks in the arroyo? Didn't you and Butch see the steers come down the ravine — and see that pair of sneaking rustlers sneak out of the arroyo later on? Didn't you, Red, come in to warn me last night? Didn't I ride out with you and make sure, and this morning didn't they fire at you both, without provocation, when I left you to watch them and they tried to rustle a bunch of fifty steers?"

"Judas priest!" Redeye gave voice to his admiration. "Mat, when it comes to lying, you're in the blue-ribbon class. Only thing, they give you just as many years for perj'ry."

"Give the Lazy S Bar, you mean. Only two of that outfit; three of us. Colorow is an unknown. The oaths of you two will out-weigh his. Mine will out-weigh Jacarilla's. I stand a sight higher than an old scoundrel known all over the state for his tricky rustling, his picking up of mavericks, his brand blotting. They're the ones apt to land in the pen for perjury and conspiracy against me. Nobody ever got anything on me. I've never even been charged with putting my brand on a maverick. What's more, I'm a partner in the Kay Kay. My wife is the daughter of Apache Keith and sister of Don Keith."

Redeye drew in a full breath.

"Layout begins to look good to me. What's the play?"

"We've got the cards stacked on them, boys. It's a cinch. All we've got to do is stick on, and we won't get spilled. That means you've got to get the facts clear in your think-tanks and hang onto them through thick and thin. Variation of the trimmings between our testimony will strengthen the points we all swear to the same. Savvy?"

"Sure. We're wised up on that. Butch and me *alibied* Slim out of that horse-stealing charge last spring."

"We'll make a go of this case. It'll be three against two

at the worst — and maybe three against none. It's our business to see they get what's coming to them for rustling. We'll shoot first, and let the lawyers cross-question the remaining witnesses. Now, as to that bunch of fifty steers they tried to rustle on their way back. Come to think, they succeeded. Before morning you two'll push the bunch over to the far side of the mesa."

Butch roused from his daze.

"How 'bout you? I ain't hankering to run up against Hack How, all alone with Butch, day *or* night."

"That's the work cut out for you. Mine is to hit into Socorro and round up a posse."

The word gave Redeye a bad taste in his mouth. He spat.

"Posse! Le's leave the sheriff's office outen this game."

"Too bad the sheriff is away," replied Welsh. "I guess, though, Bud will do at a pinch — Bud and a keen little posse hand-picked by me. That will help make sure that Colorow and the Sneaky Snake are saved from perjuring themselves."

"How if Glass-Eye comes jogging home 'long with them?"

Welsh's thick body stiffened. His blue eyes appeared to film over and darken with muddy blotches. After a pause so long that it set Redeye to fidgeting, the schemer spoke in a hoarse, low voice:

"If anybody gets caught in company with a pair of notorious rustlers, and if he happens to stop a bullet, it's his own fault. They'll be men in that posse who don't know him by sight."

Redeye could see as far through a hole in a grindstone as could some others.

"I'm on, Mat. If it's a mis-fire, we might 's well die as a old sheep as a lamb. He ain't married. That means his third the Kay Kay 'll go to your missus. Only thing, I take it she ain't easy rode."

"I'll break her soon enough," muttered Welsh. "Soon as

they're all out of the way, I'll break her! Get those steers across the mesa tonight, or I'll skin you both alive!"

He wheeled his horse down the arroyo and spurred him into a dead run.

By the time he neared the ranch, the horse was staggering. The out-ridden beast fell a dozen jumps short of the garage. As he went down, Welsh leaped over his head and ran forward to the garage door. He had run the big car out into the road when old Jake came limping to see what was the matter.

"Tell 'em at the house, Jake," he shouted. "We caught the Lazy S Bar bosses rustling. I'm going for the sheriff."

The car roared off down the road in a swirl of dust. Before hurrying to the *casa* Jake slipped off the bridle and cut the cinch strap of Welsh's saddle, to ease the wheezing wind-broken horse.

Welsh reached Socorro and was talking to Bud in the outer room of the sheriff's office, when the telegram from the Lazy S Bar was delivered. Bud signed for it. Welsh's mind was running on high. He suspected the contents of the message. At his insistence, Bud opened the envelope. The result was a return message sent to the Lazy S Bar in the name of the sheriff.

During the night Welsh returned to the ranch with only three men beside Bud. Really reliable gunmen were hard to find on such short notice. He felt some doubts even of the three, but had taken them on Bud's recommendation. Better than an outside posse would be one composed for the most part of Kay Kay men. That would involve Gerda and Keith in whatever should happen.

At the ranch he wakened every man in the bunk room and recited the "facts" about Tyrrel and Howbert's rustling. Afterwards Bud deputized all — even Cookie — to be ready for service in the morning.

Welsh then went across to the main part of the *casa*. Late

as was the hour, he found Gerda and Pilar waiting for him in the *sala*. Both were greatly wrought up, but Gerda managed to make a show of coolness. When Welsh came in, she restrained her cousin's excited outcry, and asked in a steady but oddly flat voice:

"What's all this about Lazy S Bar rustling?"

With a savage exultance of look and tone that gave a strong semblance of truth to his words, Welsh told over the "facts" of how he and Redeye and Butch had uncovered the treacherous conspiracy and cattle stealing of the Lazy S Bar owners.

Before he had finished, Pilar's black eyes were wide with horror. How foolish of her *querido amigo* to permit himself to be so easily caught! But Gerda only smiled ironically.

"It won't hold water, Mat. If the Kay Kay were all yours, and Jacarilla without a partner, you might be able to convince me he's gone back to his old ways. But he has a partner who wouldn't even allow their brand to be put on a doubtful maverick."

"That's your opinion."

"It certainly is. What's more, everybody knows that old Hack How hasn't rustled a calf for over twenty years. I doubt if he was any worse than a lot of others, even in the old days. Main difference was that your dad and the other big outfits that sided with him, cleaned out the nesters and took over every head in their little herds; but Hack was one nester that came back at them and got away with it."

"Well, I'm telling you he won't get away with it this time. The old wolf has put his paw into the trap at last — and that slick young coyote is caught with him. I've got the evidence, and I've got the law on my side, and now I'm going to get them sure as shooting."

The ominous emphasis on the last word struck into Gerda's heart like a knife thrust. Yet she forced back the cry that

sought to burst from her tightening throat.

"You don't mean to — how about Donnie?"

"That's one reason I want to strike as quick as possible. If they get wind of our coming, they're apt to hold him as hostage."

Quickly as Welsh looked away, Gerda perceived the muddy spots that blotched the steel-blue of his eyes. This time she could not choke back the cry:

"Oh . . . . You — you mean — hold him ——"

"Yes; same as that yellow-streaked Slick Dick held him up, in the *patio* — to stop our bullets."

Gerda clapped a hand over Pilar's mouth to stifle her scream.

"Be still! They'll never use Donnie for a sandbag. So you're going to clean them up, Mat? You have it all framed to prove you're the top man. I'll wait and see which end of the horn you come out. When do you start?"

Calmly as she spoke, Welsh also was on his guard. His sideward glance caught the glint under her lowering lashes. He smiled.

"At sunrise. Plenty of time. We don't want to jump their camp until after dark tomorrow night. Want to come along and see the fun?"

"I'd like to, Mat, but — what would people say?" The girl put up her hand to cover a yawn. "Come, Pilar. If I'm to see them off, we'll have to go to bed."

"Pleasant dreams!" said Welsh.

He walked heavily out across the veranda and along the stone flags of the path. Under the black shadow of the pear tree he stopped and pulled off his boots. . . . .

Pilar's door stood wide open. She was kneeling before her little shrine. As she straightened to cross herself, her eyes lifted their Heaven-appealing gaze as high as the ancient altar pieces at the foot of the Holy Virgin. In the polished

silver bowl surface of the chalice she saw mirrored the outline of the doorway . . . . out in the blackness of the corridor, around the edge of the door frame, was peering a big dark-flushed, devilish face.

Too terrified even to scream, the girl flung up her hands to the Virgin for protection. It was a moment natural to a devout worshipper. Her pallid face and glaring eyes were not visible from the corridor doorway. The frightful face disappeared . . . . a vague form glided aslant the corridor towards Gerda's door.

Pilar's trembling hands clutched at the edge of the shrine niche. The fingers of her right hand came down upon the crucifix hilt of the little Spanish dagger. The touch roused her like the sear of white-hot steel — it sent a fiery flame of courage flaming through her terror-palsied body. Her fingers clutched the hilt of the blade — this was the Holy Mother's answer to her appeal!

The prowler had pushed in the ponderous, old iron-clamped oak door of Gerda's room with his left hand. He stood on the threshold, peering around the half-lighted boudoir. In under his thick arm darted a little fury, who whirled and flew at him, screaming and striking. His up-jerked elbow barely saved his throat from the stab of the blade.

He roared and hurled the girl across the room with the outsweep of his slashed arm. As she fell stunned, Gerda sprang in through the doorway of her bedroom. She saw Pilar — she saw Welsh, half-turned, in the act of locking the door. Midway between them, the lamplight from her bedroom glinted on the blade of the little dagger. She rushed to catch it up.

Welsh pocketed the key and took a step towards her, his gaze fixed upon the loveliness of her snowy shoulders.

"Good evening, Mrs. Welsh. Glad you're taking it quietly. Might have known you would. You're no squally

little greaser wildcat. I don't mind saying I'm proud of my wife."

"I can't say the same of my husband," rejoined Gerda, her head high and eyes blazing with green fire. "Rustler! Liar! Sneak! *Vamos!*"

His thin lips twisted in a grin of mingled rage and gloating.

"That settles it, Mrs. Welsh. I came to gentle. I'll stay to break."

"No. You will not dare! I'm the daughter of Apache Keith."

"You're my wife."

"Have I denied it? But——"

He took a step forward, his eyes aflame. She raised the little blade and put the point to her breast.

"I told you, Mat, you would first have to prove yourself the better man. You should know me better than to think you can break me. I am not afraid of you, and I am not afraid of death. I shall not run like a scared rat in a cage—nor shall I lower myself to struggle against you. I am a strong girl, but you are a very strong man. Unless I should happen to get in a lucky stroke with this toy. *Pah!* The very thought of your hands . . . . one step nearer, and I drive home the point."

There was no mistaking her tone, the proud poise of her gold-glinting head, the look in her beautiful eyes. He knew her far too well to doubt for an instant. She was as quick or quicker than himself. Even had he been close, he could not have hoped to catch her wrist in time. To jump in would mean to lose her forever.

Even at that, he might have risked it—only she had reminded him of his chance to make good. All would not be lost if he should back off now. On the contrary, he had only to go and rid himself of the other man, then come and claim her. She prided herself on keeping her word. But he had

not forgotten that look in her eyes, down in the *sala*.

"All right," he muttered. "We'll postpone it. Don't get nervous. I'm just going to sidle round and make sure you'll be all snug and cozy."

He circled to the left and went in through the other rooms of the suite. All faced on the outer wall of the *casa*. The narrow casement windows had been built to hold out Apache war parties. The thick iron bars were set solidly in the masonry. The only doors were between the rooms. None opened into the corridor. As he came out, Pilar began to moan with returning consciousness. He picked her up, not ungently, and carried her in to the bed. Gerda followed, always keeping beyond reach of his powerful hands.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to hurt her. But that scratch." He looked down at the reddened slash in his sleeve. "Better see to her. I'll leave now — to make good. I'm not going to ride him. I'm going to ride *over* him! No use your screeching. Everybody's fast asleep . . . . and out of earshot, anyhow."

He slammed shut the bedroom door and locked it on the outside.

Gerda whirled about to the bed. She bent low to peer anxiously into Pilar's face. The black eyes were wide open. They stared up at her dazedly.

"*Niña!*" she cried. "Tell me — tell me! Are you hurt?"

Pilar half turned, sat up, and suddenly sprang from the bed, her eyes glaring with horror.

"He . . . . what — what did he ——"

"Gone away — gone!"

Out went Gerda's arms, to sweep up the little trembler and crush her in a hug of passionate love and gratitude.

"You darling — you brave, brave little darling!"

It did not seem possible — hateful, haughty, contemptuous Gerda, hugging her, calling her sweet names! The dazed

girl could not believe her little ears . . . . yet it really was true. Gerda really was squeezing her tight, kissing her, thanking her — the proud Gerda thanking *her!*

Pilar burst into a happy hysterical storm of tears.

CHAPTER XXXVII

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES

OVER across the Chupadera, at the ruined pueblo, Billy Bull came back from the railroad, an hour before dawn, with telegrams from the four sheriffs to whom messages had been sent. Two said no action would be taken until assurance was received that a warrant had been sworn out against Mat Welsh. Another said that notices of the reward offered for the capture of the alleged rustlers would be posted up and published.

The third telegram, sent over the name of the sheriff of Socorro County, stated that a posse would start direct for the Kay Kay ranch at sunrise, and ordered the Lazy S Bar to wait for the second posse that was to come around by train.

"Wants to nail that five hun'erd reward all his ownself, *heh?*" said Howbert. "Well, seeing as how Dick shies that carcass delicious, we'll say *whoa* to ourselves."

"I shall start at once, as planned," replied Keith. "It will be all the better. My return alone may throw off their guard — if they have not already skipped the country."

All three had turned out of their blankets and started to pull on their boots as soon as the telegrams came. Tyrrel buckled on the old Chavez belt.

"Come on, dad. Let's leave orders for the boys to follow with the posse. We can go ahead to the far edge of the mesa with Mr. Keith, and see what's to be seen."

Howbert groaned and straightened up to bark at Billy Bull:

"You no-'count kid buckaroo! You gone plumb deef?

Hustle out and saddle up and — wait a minute — roust out that lazy cook and tell him to get a move on, or I'll jam his *cabeza* into the bean kettle."

Billy hustled out, grinning. To all friends and hired help, old Hack How's bark was worse than his bite.

In the first gray of dawn the three riders angled down into the west valley and slanted across to the break in the mesa side, up which wound the cattle trail.

The climbing was slow work. But up on top the pace became fairly brisk. At last they came to the far side of the great mesa, where they could look down on the western plateau. Howbert uncased an old pair of field glasses and swept the lower ground. Neither he nor Tyrrel nor Keith could see any men, afoot or horseback.

The scattered bunches of grazing cattle, however, proved too much for Jacarilla Howbert.

"I ain't going to set here all day like a bump on a log. You can do as you've a mind to, son. I'm going down with Don to show him them rustled steers."

Tyrrel's reply was to pull his rifle from its sheath under his stirrup flap. Instead of leading on down the beaten trail, Howbert headed to the left, along a ridge of bare flat limestone ledges. Beyond the ledges he pointed out a half-broken cattle trail that slanted into the head of a ravine. This was the way along which the rustlers had turned off the main trail with their stolen steers and taken them down into the rimmed bowl for branding.

The ravine was so steep that in places the horses had to slide on their haunches. But all reached the foot without mishap. Near the bottom, as Howbert had surmised on his first coming to the bowl, a little seepage spring trickled from the rocks. It oozed through a string of muddy nose holes and disappeared under more rocks.

A few yards below, half a dozen steers were coming up to

the spring. Being thirsty, they held their ground long enough for Keith to get a clear look at the second brands.

"Fresh!" he exclaimed. "If only we could catch the skunks with their saddle-irons hot! Mat's oath will carry weight. He may be able even to *alibi* Red and Butch. We have only circumstantial evidence — wait. The horse he rode yesterday has a split hoof. His off hind shoe is clamped across."

"We noticed the print," said Tyrrel.

"That gives us fair proof. I'll ride down the arroyo, so that I too can testify to it. Perhaps I can identify the tracks of the other horses."

"Go ahead," agreed Howbert. "Dick and me best cut across here to the trail, and mebbe slide along under cover to them rocks where Butch and Red held the sack. Good place to hold-up till our boys and the second posse comes along."

Keith moistened the top of his head from the hat sponge and turned his horse towards the lower end of the bowl.

"Hold on," said Howbert. "That there grazing proposition — you tell Miss Gerdy not to worry 'bout your feeders, nor your cows, neither. I ain't forgot your dad once sided me. Just soon 's we get Mat hog-tied, you start trailing your cattle 'crost the mesa. I figger we can take care of two thousand head, or there'bouts, till you get enough grass and water to home. 'Tain't going to cost you and Miss Gerdy nary a cent, neither. What say, son?"

Tyrrel was no less astonished than Keith over the munificent offer. He could no more than get out a laconic, "Suits me!"

Keith could not even say that much. He gripped the old man's gloved hand and rode off hastily for fear of giving away to his feelings.

As he parted from Tyrrel and Howbert, a one-eyed watcher

slid to the foot of the arroyo bank at the lower end of the bowl, jumped upon his horse, and rode hard down the bed of the wash.

When Keith came down the arroyo from farther up, his thoughts were intent upon pleasant calculations of what Howbert's generous offer would mean to the Kay Kay. Instead of heavy losses he could see a fair chance of making even some gains, in the event that the next season's market should prove favorable for heavy steers.

His mind was so engrossed upon this happy prospect and all it would mean to the Kay Kay that he failed to notice the fresh horse tracks. In the dry gravel these tracks were hard to distinguish from the other recent ones. He did not push his horse out of a jog.

Redeye soon came to where the arroyo twisted close to the herd trail. He spurred his horse to the top of the bank and raced up the ridge to where Butch was watching from behind a mass of rocks. He waved and pointed backwards, and galloped on at headlong speed down the far side of the hill.

A mile away, beyond the crossing of the trail and the round-up road, Welsh, on the fretful, side-jumping Lobo, was jogging along with Bud, a short distance in the lead of the posse. He had things to say to his deputy-sheriff friend that were not for the ears of the others. In the posse were the three gunmen from Socorro and eight men of the Kay Kay, among them Gailor and Cookie. But old Jake, though deputized with the others, was missing.

Welsh was first to see the riders come galloping over Butch's watch hill. He pointed him out to Bud.

"Something's doing. That must be Red or Butch. I'll ride ahead and find out what's up. Bring the boys on easy, unless I signal."

He not only gave the fretting Lobo his head, but spurred

him with wanton cruelty. Fast as Redeye's horse was coming, Lobo met him a good deal more than half way. He had managed to get the bit in his teeth. His maddened rush carried him many lengths past the up-reining Redeye. Welsh at last brought him to a halt with a jerk that almost broke his jaw.

The high-tempered thoroughbred belonged to Gerda and he hated no rider more than his present one. In the opinion of Welsh, these were alike good reasons for mercilessly spurring and quirting the roan until Redeye hurried to them.

"What's doing?" he shouted. "Stand still, you crazy devil, or I'll yank your head off! Cough up, Red."

"He's coming — Glass-Eyes — down the wash — alone!" panted Redeye. "Him and them ——"

"Who?"

"Old Hack and Tyrrel — I seen 'em come down the ravine. They shown him the steers. Cut 'cross towards the trail. He's coming down the wash."

Welsh looked back at the posse, nearly half a mile away.

"Come on," he shouted. "It's made to order for us. The ridge'll be between."

They raced up the ridge side. Lobo leaped enough into the lead for Welsh to rein in at the top and call out a command to Butch:

"When I wave my hat, signal the bunch and come a-running."

In the bottom, at the foot of the ridge, he and Redeye jumped from their horses and ran forward to where they could peer up the arroyo to the first bend. They were none too soon for the purpose they had in mind. A wait of a few moments — just long enough for their hands to steady; then Keith appeared around the bend on his leisurely jog-trotting horse.

If it was to come to hanging, Welsh was determined that

more than one rope should be stretched. He waited for the roar of Redeye's rifle before twitching the trigger of his own. Though the delay was only for the fraction of a second, Keith was already pitching out of his saddle when Welsh's rifle roared. In his fall, his right foot caught in the stirrup.

The two rifles roared a second time during the less than two seconds that the horse dragged his master. One of the bullets struck short and either glanced against the horse or knocked a chip of gravel against him. He side-jumped, jerking Keith's foot out of the stirrup. Keith's body fell limp — it lay inert.

"He's got his!" shouted Welsh, and he waved his hat. "Round to the bend now. Hot-foot it! Smoke 'em up — smoke 'em up!"

They ran along the arroyo bank to the bend, firing their rifles ahead of them. Butch galloped down the hill, shooting into the air as fast as he could pull trigger.

When Bud and the posse raced up over the round of the ridge, they saw the three leaders lying on the edge of the arroyo and firing into the distance. With an order for his companions to keep up the fire, Welsh ran back to meet the down-charge of the posse. On the way he looked to make certain that Keith had not moved. The body was lying exactly as it had fallen.

He ran on and rushed towards Lobo to grasp the trailing bridle reins. Lobo whirled and kicked. It was no time to fool with a fractious horse. Welsh sheered off and flung himself upon Butch's broncho. He waved on the posse with wild beckonings and shouts.

"Come along! come along! Ride, boys, ride! Up the arroyo! They've shot Don — shot Mr. Keith! Trailed him 'cross the mesa. Red saw 'em chasing him. They shot him just as we came at 'em — shot him, and ran for it!"

"Where's — Mr. Keith?" shouted back Gailor.

"In the wash. Come on — wait! You, Bud, take a bunch on 'long the trail. They may've cut up out the wash and across. Rest of you, follow me."

As the posse split in two, Redeye and Butch came wheezing. Redeye was on his horse in a twinkling. But he had no relish for riding up the arroyo past that lax outstretched body. He spurred his horse in among Bud's sideward veering bunch.

The others galloped after Welsh, to plunge down the arroyo bank — all except Butch. He was left alone, trying to catch Lobo. Welsh led the chase up the arroyo at a dead run. All the others followed at the same hot pace.

But as the bunch raced past the riderless horse and his prone master, first Gailor, then Cookie, drew rein. They came to a halt and jumped off to run and look at the body. It lay face down. They turned it over. It was utterly flaccid. The face was a ghastly sallow gray.

Strangely, the big shell-rimmed spectacles were still in place and unbroken. The horse had dragged the body only three or four steps. The glitter of the sunrays on the glasses gave an uncanny effect, as of brilliant eyes flashing behind them. But the kindly gray eyes were closed. Gailor passed his hand in front of his face.

"Shirt red, and look at the hole 'longside his dome! Both got him — the dirty rustling skunks!"

Fat Cookie went to pick up the big sombrero. He carefully dusted it and placed it gently over the ghastly face and the reddened crown of the bald head.

"C'mon," he choked. "Let's go get them 'sassins."

They galloped off after the others.

Meantime Butch was having a lively minute. After several jumps, he managed to clutch the reins of Lobo's bridle. The angered thoroughbred struck with his fore hoofs and whirled to kick. In the scuffle Butch lost his rifle.

Yet with a wild hop-mount, he managed to make the stirrup and flung himself into the saddle.

Unlike Redeye, he was too callous to dread passing that which lay down in the bed of the arroyo. But he was not given choice of parties. As his leg swung over the cantle of the saddle, Lobo caught the bit in his teeth and bolted up the road.

Never before in his life, not even in a quarter-dash race, had Butch ridden so fast. The maddened thoroughbred ran even swifter than he had run with Welsh. He rapidly narrowed the distance between himself and Bud's half of the posse. While they were still a little short of the rocks where his rider and Redeye had lain in wait for Tyrrel and Howbert he came tearing past the out-strung bunch.

Bud and Redeye, in the lead, were almost opposite the near end of the rocks when Lobo shot past them. Redeye's horse lunged after him. At the same moment their riders hurled down out of their saddles, Butch sideways, Redeye backwards. As they fell, the crack of two rifle shots came from the midst of the ledges.

With a yell, Bud flung himself forward and down on the left side of his horse's neck. On the way, his hat was knocked off by a bullet. He swung his horse off to the left of the trail, towards the nearest cover. The rest of the men scattered out after him like a covey of frightened quail.

Some of the party were less expert in hiding behind their horses. They could easily have been shot out of their saddles. But at the moment when they were most exposed to the rifles on the rocks a quick succession of shots burst out from the direction of the arroyo. The rattle quickened into a ragged volley.

From what Redeye had told him, Welsh had no thought of finding Tyrrel and Howbert short of the mesa top. He felt certain that, having shown the rustled steers to Keith,

they had back-trailed to wait for the mythical second posse of the sheriff of Socorro County. Yet he led his followers on at top speed, not only to get them farther away from that prone body and possible awkward questions regarding it, but also to keep the minds of all inflamed with the heat of the man-hunt.

The reports of the first two rifle shots found him only a little way below a point opposite the rock ledges. He made a flying leap from Butch's broncho and ran to climb the bank. The nearest of the following riders rushed to scramble up after him.

He topped the bank. Two horses stood in the angle of the ledges where Tyrrel had seen the horses of Butch and Redeye. Even at that distance, the high withers, sloped hindquarters and sagged head of Anté were unmistakable. Welsh glimpsed a hat crown above and to the left of the horses. He clapped the butt of his automatic rifle to his shoulder and fired as fast as he could pull the trigger.

Each man, as he flung himself up over the edge of the bank joined in the burst of shots. But in a few seconds came answering shots, well aimed. One of the Socorro gunmen rolled back into the arroyo with a shattered shoulder. A steel-jacketed bullet seared the side of Welsh's thick neck, under his notched ear. He flattened behind a big yucca to reload.

Two of the other men found yuccas. The rest slid back into the gully. Welsh bellowed commands down to them:

"Scatter! Up-wash — down it! Crawl out. Surround the bloody murderers!"

Gailor, last but Cookie to arrive, scrambled over the edge of the bank in a white rage. He and old Jake had taught little Donnie Keith how to sit his first horse. He stood straight up and charged towards the rocks. Within a dozen paces he pitched on his face, shot through the leg. But no

second shot struck him as he rolled from the open spot where he had fallen to the shelter of a yucca.

"Ease off. Save your cartridges," Welsh ordered his two wildly firing companions. "We can't flush 'em from here. Just keep pegging away enough to hold 'em close. I'm going to back down the arroyo and work out up that last side gully."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MEDDLING MAIDS

ALL night and most of the morning the two imprisoned girls had worked, turn about, with the little dagger. The old *casa* had been built to resist attack on the inside as well as from the outside. Even the doors between the rooms of the outer suites were massive. There were no thin panels, easy to cut through.

Whenever Gerda could no longer hold the dagger, Pilar scratched away at the hard oak. She could do little, with her small wrists and hands. But while she worked, Gerda regained strength for renewed efforts. Hours passed before the little blade cut through the thick oak, all around the heavy wrought-iron lock.

With a heave of her strong white shoulder, Gerda shoved the door wide open. They hurried into her boudoir with the lamp. The corridor door was far more ponderous. It was studded and clamped with iron, and its lock was larger. But Gerda clenched her teeth and went at it.

The end of the dagger blade had become dulled. Between Gerda's fierce spurts of hacking and gnawing at the door Pilar whetted the blade on the stone of the casement window sill, using cold cream for oil. After a time Gerda, in her over-eagerness, snapped off the thin blade close to the hilt. She then had to work without the leverage of the handle and hold the blade wrapped in a cloth. This retarded the already tediously slow gnawing of the point into the tough hard oak.

Dawn came, then full daylight. Gerda worked on with desperate energy. Each time that she sank down exhausted,

Pilar ran to grind the dulled blade point on the casement stone. Every little while she screamed for help, out between the heavy bars of the window. But none of the servants or ranch hands came to release their mistresses.

The morning wore on, and still Gerda gnawed and gouged and scraped with the broken blade. She had cut through the door above and below the huge old Spanish lock. She now was cutting down from one jagged slit to the other.

Pilar dressed for horseback, and laid out beside the door her cousin's boots and riding skirt, blouse and hat. Sight of the costume enheartened Gerda. She attacked the oaken enemy with renewed vigor. The little blade gnawed deeper and deeper. It penetrated through the thickness of the oak. And then, when it should have thrust out at the other side, its point *screeched* upon iron.

Too late, Gerda remembered that the outside plate of the lock extended farther than the one inside. Its end was riveted to a pair of inside studs. Yet, even then, she did not break down and give way to despair. She ran into her bedroom, flung clothes, mattress and springs from her metal bed, and yanked out one of the side bars.

Driven endwise time after time against the lock with all the girl's strength, the heavy bar at last burst loose the lock-plate rivets. Gerda clutched the side of the cut with her blistered finger tips and pulled. The door swung inward.

Pilar ran for the servants while Gerda dressed. Welsh had locked the two housemaids and the woman cook in their quarters, but the keys had not been taken from the locks. Pilar released the frightened women, and ran on through the wing of the *casa* to the men's quarters. Bunk room, mess room, and kitchen, all were empty.

She reached the stable, panting from exertion and excitement. A number of bronchos had been left in the horse corral. She was trying to rope one of them, when Gerda

rushed from the *casa* gateway. Unlike Pilar, haste had not flurried her. She carried canteens and saddlebags. She dashed into the stable and flung open the door of Lobo's box stall.

The roan was gone. But as the girl whirled to dash on through the stable, a cracked voice squeaked from the far end of the stall:

"Hol' on, Miss Gerdy! This here gosh-rotted hogging-string——"

She dropped canteens and saddlebags and darted in to drag old Jake out from under the manger. While she drew his jack knife from the pocket of his overalls and cut the hogging-string, he told how Welsh had bound him hand and foot because he refused to join the posse without orders from her.

Stiff as was the old wrangler from his bonds, and weary as were Gerda's arms and wrists and hands, only a very few minutes passed before three horses were roped and saddled. The freed prisoners went galloping away on the round-up road.

Gerda had thought of the posse as already up on the mesa. But according to Jake, Welsh had not started at dawn or even at sunrise. The posse had been gone less than an hour. He had overheard Welsh tell Bud that they must not reach the far side of the mesa before evening.

Gerda's dread-darkened eyes flashed and sparkled like powdered emerald.

"Cherk up, *niña!*" she cried. "You hear that. We'll be in time. Up on the Chupadera we'll ride round them and strike down to Tabru in time to warn Dick and Donnie."

The assurance only partly calmed Pilar's fears.

"But Mat will attack, just the same. *Poder de Dios!* There will be fighting!"

"Never think it, darling. Most the posse are our own

men. Donnie and I'll back-trail from the Lazy S Bar camp and head off the attack. You see, it'll be all right. And there's no need of your coming, sweetheart. You'll only be in the way. Better turn back. You're all worn out."

"No, no—let me come too! Please! Please!"

A lump rose in Gerda's throat as she saw again the slight form of the young girl, hurled across the room with stunning violence—saw her little dagger on the floor and the red slash of the blade across Welsh's arm.

"You ferocious, angelic wildcat kitten! Come, then, if you wish, darling!"

They swept along the half-broken road at a steady lope that ate up the miles. Because Gerda trusted old Jake's knowledge of what the horses could do even more than her own judgment, she permitted him to lead. Pilar brought up the rear.

Jake held to the lope until after they turned into the herd trail and came to the rise of the ridge on which Butch had kept watch. There, at last, he slackened into a walk. The loud beat of the hoofs on the hard-baked ground ceased.

The old wrangler was a little deaf, and excitement made Pilar heedless. Gerda was first to hear the distant shots. Crying out for Pilar to turn back, she spurred her horse up the slope at a gallop. The hard-pressed broncho soon came snorting and puffing to the round of the ridge. He raced on up to the top.

At once Gerda heard the rifle shots even above the clatter of her horse's hoofs on the stones. The direction of the shots drew her eyes to the rocks rather over half a mile ahead. Well out on all sides from the ledges she saw horses standing. Though no men were in sight, she instantly divined that Welsh and the posse had surrounded and were attacking a smaller party.

Down the hill she raced as fast as her horse could run.

Jake, spurring over the crest after her, followed at a pace hardly less hot. Pilar's horse was slower. Coming up the ridge, she had not been able to get him to go faster than a singlefoot. He did not reach the crest until the others were half down into the little valley. They were well up the opposite rise when he neared the foot of the down-slope.

He looked off to the right. Instinctively Pilar also looked. A riderless horse was plunging up over the edge of the arroyo. From the saddlehorn a rope slanted down backwards — a taut rope. Pilar's horse swept on along the trail, across the sag of the bottom. But curiosity kept the girl's head twisting around to look.

The riderless horse was moving slowly forward, dragging on the rope. Above the brink of the arroyo bank appeared a big Mexican sombrero.

Pilar pulled her horse around in so narrow a quarter-circle that he almost pitched on his shoulder. The other horse had stopped. Keith's body lay outstretched, with the feet dangling over the edge of the bank.

Sobbing with fright, the girl flung herself out of her saddle to loosen the rope from under the arms and tug the body over, face upwards. She first saw the red blotch on the shirt. The off-tilting of the sombrero then showed her the blackening red that covered the bald head.

Down she dropped, to throw herself upon his breast and clutch at him with grief-palsied shaking hands.

"Oh! oh! Don *Señor!* my *querido!* Speak to me! speak to me!"

No answering word came from the gray lips; no look of kindly assurance from the closed eyes. Yet she would not believe that the worst could be true. She struggled up to run for her canteen. With her slender body she shielded his bared head from the burning sunrays, while she bathed the long gash in his bare scalp.

Neither Gerda or Jake had looked back — neither had seen the horse come up out of the arroyo. They were already over the last rise and racing towards the rocks.

Half way they saw a horse off to the left — Lobo! The thoroughbred was quietly cropping grass, all unconcerned at the fitful crack of rifles that spoke of deadly menace to the fighting humans.

Only a short distance farther along Welsh leaped up the bank of a little gully that ran across the trail and down around into the arroyo. He stood in front of the racing horses, wildly waving his hat and rifle.

"Stop! stop!" he bellowed.

At each side of the narrow trail the gully was too wide for horses to leap across, yet too narrow at the bottom to jump into at a gallop. Lobo would have run right over Welsh. The broncho slithered almost to a stop. Before Gerda's quirt and spurs could side-swirl him past the trail-blocker, Welsh seized the bridle of the plunging broncho. Jake's horse came to a sudden halt alongside.

"Let go my bridle!" cried Gerda, her eyes blazing with fury.

"No!" Welsh roared back at her. He glared at Jake. "You old rat! Let her loose, did you? I'll bust every bone in your carcass!"

"Wait, you bully. Don't pick on a lame little old cripple. Look here." Gerda held up her hand to show the blistered, bleeding fingers. "I cut free with the little knife that stopped you. Stand clear."

She swung up her buckskin-lashed whip of plaited horsehair. Welsh's eyes reddened.

"If you hit me, I'll break you right here and now. Get down! For God's sake, get down! Those skunks — they'll get you too. They've got Butch and Red already — and Don!"

"Donnie?" Horror chilled the girl's rage. But only for an instant. "You liar! They'd never shoot Donnie!"

"Go and see. He's lying back there in the arroyo. They got him just as we all came running down that ridge on the other side."

Horror again clutched the girl's heart.

"Dead—Donnie dead?" she whispered.

"Yes. He must have found out about their rustling, and tried to get back home. They trailed him and——"

Gerda flung out her hand towards the rocks.

"Look! look!" she gasped. "What—what are they doing?"

With his big hand still clutched tight on her horse's bridle, Welsh turned to stare. Gerda made a fierce gesture to old Jake. As he whipped off his horse at the far side, Gerda flung herself over into his saddle. Her jabbing spurs sent the horse lunging forward. Her quirt slashed across Welsh's face. The horse leaped down into the gully and up the other side.

By the time Welsh thought to vent his rage upon Jake, the lame little wrangler was scuttling back along the road out of reach.

Gerda had already covered half the distance to the rocks, riding with her right hand raised high overhead. All the members of the posse within sight of her suddenly ceased firing.

Above the center of the rocks a hat rose into clear view, upthrust on a rifle barrel. A bullet from the far side knocked it off the muzzle. But Gerda swerved her horse straight towards the spot where the hat had shown. Above it a blue neckerchief waved on the rifle barrel.

Welsh's bellowed commands to quit firing were being yelled on around the circle of attackers. Even the Socorro gunmen up the arroyo had stopped shooting by the time Gerda

spurred her frightened broncho past the bodies of Butch and Redeye. She leaped from the broncho and bounded up the rock ledges.

As her head came level with the crest, a bullet from Gailor's rifle knocked off her hat. Utterly regardless of the danger, she sprang up on the top ledge, her gold-tinted hair glinting in the sun.

At her feet, in a little pocket amidst the crest rocks, crouched the two defenders. Howbert faced the arroyo; Tyrrel faced the trail.

Howbert twisted his scrawny neck around to look over his shoulder. His face, always cadaverous, was now outright ghastly. He grinned at the wide-eyed girl and jerked his head back around to peer through his rock-notch loop-hole along the top of his leveled rifle.

Tyrrel was smiling up at Gerda. He rose to his feet.

"Glad to see you," he greeted. "Fine day, but pretty warm, don't you think? If you don't mind fetching dad a drink. Bullet hole through my canteen, and his is drained. He's been ——"

"You!" cried Gerda, "stand there and joke, when Donnie's killed!"

Tyrrel's face went blank with amazement.

"No — he — it can't be ——"

"I've just learned. Mat told me. You trailed Donnie — shot him down!"

Up came Tyrrel's hand with the old Chavez revolver. He thrust the gold-and-pearl hilt at the girl.

"If you can believe that of me, Gerda, I don't want to live."

Her fingers closed upon the revolver hilt. But her eyes were gazing entreatingly into the ruddy brown eyes of Tyrrel.

"I knew it, Dick!" she murmured. "He lied — I told him he lied. But — Donnie?"

"God knows! We came over the mesa with him — showed him the steers rustled and branded by Welsh. He rode down the arroyo to verify Welsh's horse tracks. We cut over to the trail and down to here."

Gerda tore off her white silk kerchief and waved it. On all sides the Kay Kay men began to rise out of their cover.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Howbert," warned the girl. "I guarantee you a fair trial."

"Wouldn't mind having a swig of water first, Miss Gerdy," replied the old man. "One them rikeyshied bullets sort of blooded me 'fore Dick could get it cinched up."

He grinned down at the wad of cloth under his tightly buckled belt. Gerda reached for Tyrrel's kerchief-draped rifle.

"Give me his also, Dick. You'll have to help him."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE SHOW-DOWN

AS TYRREL lifted his wounded partner up on the ledge beside Gerda, the nearer members of the posse saw the two rifles in the girl's hand. Their cautious advance broke into a run. Gerda called to the foremost to halt. They grouped in the dusty herd trail beside the bodies of Redeye and Butch.

One of the men happened to step on Butch's outflung twisted arm. Butch cursed and glared up at the men, and promptly scrambled to his feet. His only hurt was a broken arm. Fearful of another bullet, he had been shamming death. But Redeye was not shamming. He had been shot through the head. Jacarilla Howbert had been bred at a time when men shot to kill.

Gerda and Tyrrel were supporting the tottery old cowman between them down to the foot ledges. They reached the bottom. Howbert sank upon the lower shelf rock.

"I'm 'bout all in, Miss Gerda," he muttered. "You best give Dick his smoke-cart again. Here comes Mat."

Welsh had hung back until Bud ran forward to join the group of Kay Kay men and the one Socorro gunman still unwounded came around the rocks. Gerda did not return the revolver to Tyrrel; but when Welsh started to rush, she made a feint of handing it over. The threat brought Welsh up short. He jerked his thumb at Bud.

"Sheriff, do you duty. Handcuff the murderers and rush them to Socorro before the boys string them up."

Bud pushed through the group of men to swagger towards the surrendered prisoners. The highly polished deputy sheriff

badge glittered conspicuously on his out-thrust chest. Tyrrel had been completely disarmed; old Hack How plainly was near collapse, and the girl was Mrs. Welsh. Why shouldn't he swagger? Though Butch was now of no use, Welsh and their Socorro gunman could be counted upon for certain support.

But Gerda had her own views.

"Stand off," she ordered. "These men have surrendered to me. They're my prisoners."

"You took 'em all right, ma'am," admitted Bud. "Guess you'll get your slice of the reward. All the same, you ain't got no license to stop a dep'ty sheriff and his posse. C'mon, boys. Le's take them bloody murderers!"

Howbert straightened up. Bud suddenly found himself looking into a revolver muzzle alongside the old cowman's knee. Howbert grinned derisively.

"Mebbe I ain't so dead's I look, Bud. Ain't you never learned no manners when a lady asks you to behave? Shouldn't wonder if I still got a few twiggles left in my finger. Want I should first put the Lazy S Bar notch in your ear, like I done in your boss's?"

"Boys," said Gerda, "it's a lie what Mat says. These men did not kill my brother. Dick tells me——"

"They did!" roared Welsh. "Here's half a dozen men saw him—poor old Don—lying back there in the wash—dead—murdered by these dirty rustling skunks! She loves that fellow Tyrrel—that's what's the matter! But her own brother! Think of him, you Kay Kay men! Don Keith, the best boss you ever had, lying there—shot down—shot down from behind! And Red here—murdered too! Butch and Gailor and others badly wounded! You going to stand for it? Get a rope!"

"A rope—get a rope!" howled Butch. "Lynch 'em! String 'em up! Lynch 'em!"

Over the crest of the rocks came panting fat Cookie. He glared down the ledges and added his yells to Butch's:

"*Hi! hi!* There they are! Lynch 'em—lynch 'em!"

Welsh's goading had already done the work. The infuriated men swayed—started to surge forward. Even then Gerda did not hand the revolver to Tyrrel. Instead, she jumped before him and Howbert, blanking the old man's view of Bud and Welsh. The rifles fell clattering from the hand that she flung out to point down the trail.

The gesture checked the rush of the would-be lynchers, when a cry of protest would only have goaded them into greater fury. They paused for an instant to look where the girl was pointing.

They saw Lobo racing towards them—on his back old Jake frantically waving his hat and gesturing backwards. As he swept nearer they heard his yells:

"They's coming! *Hi*, boys! hold yer hosses! They's coming—Miss Pilar—she's fetching him!"

Beyond Lobo a horse glided up out of a dip in the trail—a single-footing horse with two riders. In the saddle sat a firmly braced little figure. On behind, a larger figure, topped with a great sombrero, swayed drunkenly from side to side, clinging to the girlish figure in front.

"Donnie!" screamed Gerda. "*Alive!*"

Welsh clutched at his slipping opportunity.

"Not dead, but badly hurt!" he shouted. "And here's Red, boys, murdered from cover! Come on! At the skunks! String them up!"

But even Cookie, scrambling down to jump the prisoners from the rear, failed to respond. Welsh's fresh appeal fell flat. Not even the Socorro gunman cared two bits for the dead Redeye. That left only Bud and Butch and Welsh. But Butch was in a bad way from his shattered arm, and all of Bud's aggressiveness had evaporated with the realization

that the bunch were no longer backing him. They stood waiting for the directions of their wounded boss.

Jake brought Lobo to a plunging stop close beside his mistress. He slid out of his saddle, to line up beside her. Not even Welsh heeded the move. Like the others, he was staring towards the approaching riders.

He made no attempt to run. But in his bloodshot blue eyes was the look of a trapped wolf. Behind his scowl he thought hard and fast. There was still a chance left — a good chance if only Keith had not seen . . . . yes, a good chance. Redeye was dead. But Butch would stand pat, if only to save himself.

Even with his hold on Pilar, Keith could not have kept his seat at any pace faster than a walk, except upon such a smooth-gaited, single-footing horse. From as far away as he had been able to see, the sight of the two groups at the rocks had told him the great danger to his friends. It had given him strength to cling on. He did not fall until Pilar drew rein a little short of the larger group.

But Jake and Cookie had run to meet them. They caught Keith as he toppled over. All the other men except Bud and Welsh, Butch and the Socorro gunman, came crowding around.

Canteen in hand, Pilar plumped down in the trail dust in their midst. She took Keith's head in her lap and began to sprinkle water in his face and over his bandaged head.

"Stand away. Give him air!" she commanded. "He's not dead. They're only scratches, both places. He's not going to die. He promised me he wouldn't. He's going to get well to marry me!"

Tyrrel strangled a chuckle:

"*Ah-m* — forgive me, Glory Girl, but the thought of him! Took a bullet to drive that into his head!"

Gerda did not smile. She had not for an instant lost

sight of Welsh. The Socorro gunman was backing off around the rocks. Bud had become as harmless as a child. Butch was helpless. That left only Welsh. But he still had his pistol; and the men might refuse to disarm him until they heard what her brother had to say. She waited, crushing down by sheer will power her almost irresistible impulse to rush to her brother.

The wait was brief. Keith's eyes opened. Their blurred gaze looked up into the tender eyes of Pilar. He smiled. The girl wiped and replaced his spectacles. After a few moments she permitted Jake and Cookie to obey his request for them to lift him up. His first words won him a cheer.

"Congratulate me, boys! War is hell; but I've landed in heaven!"

Pilar blushed and smiled and kept her supporting arm fast about his waist. His gaze fell upon the morose face of Welsh. The smile left his bloodless lips. His voice rang out strong and clear:

"Mat Welsh, I charge you with rustling and attempted murder — you and your accomplices, Butch and Redeye. There's that deputy sheriff. Officer, arrest this man!"

Bud stood stock still, gaping. Welsh stepped sideways and backwards to get everyone in front of him.

"Not so fast," he said. "You don't make me the goat for the real rustlers, just because they've murdered one of my witnesses and shot up the other. I know all about that bunch of Lazy S steers they drove over here and put our brand on, framing to lay it on me. What's more, I know they drove a bunch of our steers back with them — a clear case of rustling. When Red and Butch tried to stop the steal, they fired at them. Here's Butch to tell you all about that. They can't deny it. Nor can they deny rustling the steers. Look up on the mesa and you'll find the tracks."

"You claim they did it themselves?" asked Keith.

"I sure do. They fired at Butch and ——"

"It's no use, Mat. You've given yourself away. I trailed after them to the Lazy S Bar yesterday. The last cattle tracks were pointed this way on the trail. I spent all last night with Mr. Tyrrel and Mr. Howbert — slept with them. This morning we met a bunch of Kay Kay steers, just down from the mesa on that side — tracks fresh. They had been driven over by you or your accomplices. There are no other rustlers around the Kay Kay."

Welsh would not admit defeat.

"Every man of the Sneaky Snake is a rustler. Jacarilla must have sent a couple to do it for him. Afraid to put through his own stealing."

Howbert raised his down-drooped head. His parched lips twisted in a mocking grin.

"Feared, *huh?* If I'd 'a' been minded to rustle off you, I'd 'a' come and took your whole brand — hoof, hide, and hair — and your Lazy S Bar notch, to boot."

Welsh jerked his hand towards his hip. On the instant he was covered by half a dozen Kay Kay pistols. His hands went up with reluctant slowness. None the less, they went up.

"That's right, boys," said Keith. "He and Red both shot me. First bullet creased me — side of my head — knocked me out. Second one glanced around my ribs. Get his gun."

As one of the men took Welsh's pistol from its holster and stepped clear, Gerda's hand sagged down with the old Chavez revolver. The weapon dropped from her lax fingers. She turned to Tyrrel, swayed, and flung her arms about his neck. Her head sank upon his shoulder. Had he not held her fast, she would have fallen. He was badly frightened.

"Water!" he cried — "water! She's dying!"

Old Jake came limping and hobbling with Pilar's half-emptied canteen. He dashed water into Gerda's white face.

With a gasp, she came out of her partial faint. Tyrrel heaved a sigh of relief.

"'Nuff, Jake," he said. "Give the rest to Mr. Howbert."

The wrangler turned and uptilted the canteen to the parched lips of the wounded man. Gerda, still faint with the revulsion from her deathly fear, made no attempt to draw away from Tyrrel. She clung to him, gazing up into his grave eyes with passionate tenderness.

"He was — he was going to kill you — first, Dick," she whispered. "Kill you . . . . yet I could not — let you — have the gun!"

"I understand, Glory Girl. You could not, because you've changed. You no longer want me to win that way."

Welsh risked lowering his hands. As the men knew he was disarmed, they did not shoot. He burst into a jeering laugh and stepped towards the group at the ledges.

"Great moral spectacle you're making of yourself, Mrs. Welsh," he gibed.

The stroke stung her far worse than the slash of her quirt across his face had stung him. She sprang away from Tyrrel, her face aflame with hot crimson.

"That's enough from you, Welsh," said her brother. "She'll not long be your wife. Conviction for felony is good grounds for divorce."

"Not for her," rejoined Welsh. "She gave me her promise — for better or for worse, until death. Was that a lie? What about her brag that the Keiths never break their word?"

Gerda shuddered and flung up her hand before her eyes to shut out the hateful sight of him. Her quick rally was not based on anger, but on the strength of pride that sprang from the higher love that had come to her. She lowered her hand and faced him unflinchingly.

"It is not a lie. I married you of my own free will. I

gave you my pledge. Unless you yourself free me, nothing can release me from my word — except my death or your death."

Again Welsh laughed.

"That means you'll stay Mrs. Welsh a long time. I'm a pretty husky specimen, and so are you. Even if I land in the pen, I'll last till you're as old as the hills."

Little Jake jumped forward from beside Howbert, hopping mad. He ran to a horse.

"Danged if you will!" he yelled. "You gosh durned skunk! Here's the rope, boys. Necktie party!"

The call was like gasolene cast upon a smouldering fire. The men were doubly furious at Welsh. Not only had he shot Keith; he had led them to attack innocent men — had all but caused them to lynch the falsely accused Lazy S Bar owners.

In a twinkling they were at him, striking with fists and pistol butts, in a furious struggle to seize him for lynching. He milled around like a grizzly attacked by Airedales, striking back with his big fists and hurling them off. Even the strongest of them staggered before his blows.

But then, over the shoulders of those behind him, Jake's rope shot forward. The noose whipped down over his head and jerked tight about his thick neck. All the men within reach grabbed the rope to pull him down. As he toppled backwards across the body of Redeye, Tyrrel's voice cut the clamor of yells like a knife:

"Drop that rope! Break away!"

Some of the men turned to stare at the meddler. But those who held the rope only braced themselves to drag the strangling man. The old Chavez revolver was in Tyrrel's hand. He fired twice. Cut by the second bullet, the taut rope snapped in two. Tyrrel swung up the muzzle of the revolver at the furious men.

"Stand clear," he commanded. "Would you blacken the good name of your outfit with a lynching? Two wrongs don't make a right. There's no need of vigilante tactics nowadays. We have courts of law."

The pistol muzzle happened to swing round towards Butch. The wounded man ducked and cowered.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he howled. "I own up — I'll turn state's ev'dence. I seen Mat and Red shoot Mr. Keith. I tried to stop 'em, but ——"

"Hear that, officer?" said Tyrrel. "Step lively. Get your handcuffs on the prisoner."

Bud forced himself to shuffle towards Welsh, fearful of him, but still more fearful of the wrathful men, and, most of all, fearful of Tyrrel's revolver.

Welsh picked himself up, covered with dust, the patch torn from his notched ear — shaken, bruised, bleeding, half throttled, yet still defiant. As he jerked off the noose of the bullet-cut rope, he turned to gloat at Gerda.

Pilar drew Keith forward.

"Wait! Listen!" she cried. "It's not true — Gerda, it's not true! You're not bound by your promise! *You are not his wife!*"

Welsh's head scrouged down between his hunching shoulders. He blared at the top of his bull voice:

"She is — she's my wife! She's bound by her word! She can't marry him!"

But Tyrrel had seen his face when Pilar cried out. He called to her:

"Come here, *niña*. Tell it to Gerda."

Pilar obeyed, clinging fast to Keith, eager yet suddenly fearful. Gerda gazed at her with hopeless, lackluster eyes, utterly incredulous. The young girl tried to speak, and could not. Keith felt her tremble.

"What is it, darling?" he asked. "Tell us — quick! You

said that Gerda is not ——"

"Will — will you still love me, *querido?* No matter what ——"

"Of course, you foolish child!"

"Then I . . . . it's been all because of Gerda — the way she used to treat me, and because I — I wanted to make you jealous of Dick ——"

"Yes, yes — go on!"

"And I was going to tell in time. I'd have told that day when we came back from the mission — only it wasn't necessary. Gerda wouldn't have anything to do with him; and you wouldn't *sabe* how I wanted you to — to ——"

Tyrrel broke in sharply:

"Don't you see how you're torturing Gerda? Tell the truth — at once."

Pilar gulped, gasped, and plunged into her confession with breathless rapidity:

"The Mexican woman told me Padre Xavier had left — there was no priest — only the caretaker. Mat threatened to shoot the man — I had gone to tell him. He was in the parish house — the window was open — I heard him bully and bribe the caretaker. He paid him to put on the robes — it was not a marriage — only a sham."

"You knew that, yet didn't tell her?" reproached Keith.

"She was harsh to me — cruel! You know she was! But I meant to tell her. I would have — I was all ready to save her. But now you — you're angry at me! Yet you promised to keep on loving me!"

The wail roused Gerda from the daze of her giddily whirling thoughts. At that moment she could have forgiven her cousin for anything.

"Donnie, stop hurting the little darling! She's right. It was all my fault. I *was* harsh and cruel to her. But now . . . . Mat, tell me! Is it true?"

Welsh threw up his head.

"Yes, it's true. You don't think I'd have let my chance slip, do you, when I found the priest gone? But I would have married you again with a real parson, soon as possible."

Gerda did not stop to shudder over what she had escaped. Overjoyed, she turned to face Tyrrel. She saw him stooping to catch the down-sunken old cowman.

"Oh — dad! Dick, he's not — not yet ——"

"No," said Tyrrel. "It's bad, though."

Her brother was swaying in Pilar's arms. She took command with quick decisiveness.

"Hustle those cuffs on the prisoner, you Bud. Jake, stand by and see he does it. Rest of you, fetch the horses and wounded men. Bring them in to the ranch best you can. I'm going to Socorro for a doctor."

She ran to catch Lobo. He reared and struck at her. Tyrrel came between. The thoroughbred's flattened ears pricked up and forward. His lips closed over the wickedly bared teeth. He thrust out his muzzle to meet the gentler's quietly offered hand. The hand stroked down over his quivering nostrils and velvety lip. It went up to stroke the white star on the broad forehead.

"Your hand, too, Gerda," said Tyrrel.

The girl pressed up against his shoulder. She smiled. Her eyes looked into the eyes of the roan. She put out her hand to stroke his muzzle. Instead of jumping or baring his teeth again to bite, he nuzzled her hand.

Tyrrel patted the arching neck, and offered his knee to the foot of the radiant-eyed girl. Lobo stood still while she mounted.

"He's your horse now — now and always," said Tyrrel. "No need of your spurs. If you ask him, he'll run for you till he drops."

Gerda slipped the loop of her quirt from her wrist and

flung the cruel little whip into the dust.

"Mind dad, boy," she said.

A touch, and Lobo leaped away down the trail, his pace fast quickening into a full run.

CHAPTER XL

TRAIL'S END

BESIDES Keith and Howbert and Butch, the only man hurt seriously enough to need assistance was Gailor. After the first rush, Tyrrel and Howbert had shot only to hold off their attackers. The two wounded gunmen in the arroyo had fled with their uninjured companion. None of them ever returned to Socorro.

By the time the men came back with Gailor and the horses, Keith had become so weak that he could not stand even with support. Tyrrel took charge with quiet authority.

"Rope Redeye's body 'cross his saddle. We don't want to leave it to the coyotes. Jake, you know Billy Bull. I'll ask you to go over to Tabru. They're waiting for a posse. Welsh and Bud must have forged the sheriff's reply to our wire. Tell the boys it's all settled, but that dad — he's — going over the range."

"Gosh, no, kid! Look — I seen his finger twitch."

"Over the range — going soon, Jake. He'll be gone before you get across the mesa. But tell Billy to fetch all the boys except the pumpman. Dad told Mr. Keith we'd take care of your feeders and a thousand more Kay Kays. That's all. Stir up the dust. Bud, come here."

As Jake loped away towards the mesa, Bud sidled across the trail, glad of an excuse to get clear from the glowering Welsh.

"Yessir — yes, Mr. Tyrrel," he stammered. "I got 'em locked on tight. D'you want the key. Here 'tis."

Tyrrel looked the abashed young fellow in the eye with a steady gaze that caught and held him.

"Bud, you're still a boy. I asked Red and Butch to bury the hatchet. They chose to keep going Welsh's way. Slim listened to me. He's riding for a good outfit, and there's a young lady. . . . I'm guessing he'll wind up with his own brand — and not a calf rustled."

"*A-huh* — yessir. Slim's a cow-sharp. Me — I can't never get ahead nohow. They's a hole in my pocket."

"You'll never get it sewn up in town. How'd you like to ride for the Lazy S Bar?"

"Me — ride for old Jacarilla?" Bud cast a startled glance at the outstretched, unconscious cowman. "He — they say he treats his boys white. Only he wouldn't never take me on. He shot up my paw, back in the eighties."

"This is a new deal all around. You'll get top wages and some calves, if you make good."

Bud's fingers were fumbling in their haste to unpin his badge.

"Yessir. I — I — if I can ride for you, Mr. Tyrrel. I heard tell how you rode Still Hell, and now you've busted Big Mat."

"Wait. You'll take in your prisoners and resign; then come back to help trail the herd across. Now, boys. All set. Lift Mr. Howbert up to me. Pilar, let someone take Mr. Keith on before him, the same way. Here, you big cowboy. Get on the single-footer and take Mr. Keith. Rest of you, help Gailor and Butch into their saddles."

They strung out along the trail at a walk, Bud with Welsh's horse in lead. But the ranch was miles away, and Tyrrel feared that the old man was dying. He started Ante to single-footing.

An hour before sunset they reached the *casa*. Gailor had been able to ride all the way unaided, but he had to be carried in to his bunk. At Pilar's urging, Tyrrel bore his unconscious partner into the main *casa*, behind the two men who

carried the equally unconscious Keith.

On the upper floor the others followed the anxious girl into Keith's quarters. Not knowing where else to go, Tyrrel entered Pilar's suite. This time the dainty bed was all ready for use, with mattresses, sheets, and satin coverlet.

Having no one to open the bed, he laid Howbert on the coverlet. He started to pull off one of the greasy, dusty boots. The wounded man groaned and opened his eyes. They widened at sight of the pink and white room.

"*Uh!*" he grunted. "Dude hos'lery — *uh!* Leggo that boot."

"But, dad, I must get you into bed. Doc will soon be here."

"*Uh-uh* — no use. I — I — mebbe I'm a old fool, son — but I sort of got a notion I'd like to — cash in — with 'em on."

Tyrrel let the boots be, and brought water to cool the old man's feverish face. The one great relief to Tyrrel was that the wound seemed to give little pain. Howbert grinned and lay for a few moments with eyes half closed. A creeping shadow struck across his face. He looked up at Tyrrel.

"'Tain't sundown a'ready?"

"No, dad; not for an hour. Gerda will soon be here with the doctor."

"Nope. D'want no sawbones poking round in my innerds. I got it good and plenty this time. Old Sneaky Snake's got scotched at last — going to die at sundown."

"Oh, no, dad. Surely you'll not ——"

"'Struth. Say — once went up — roof — with Apache. C'n see the sun go down. Too close in here — no air. Take me — up."

Though afraid the old man might go at any moment, Tyrrel ran for Pilar. Keith had recovered consciousness and promptly fallen into a natural sleep. The relieved girl sent the maids ahead up to the roof, with pads and pillows

and blankets. She hastened to show Tyrrel the way after them.

The shift put the dying man back into his coma. But Tyrrel laid him down on the hard bed with his face to the left, so that, if he should again recover consciousness, he could look out over the low parapet at the sun. He sent Pilar back to watch over Keith.

Gerda had just come with the doctor, a former Army surgeon. He sterilized and dressed Keith's wounds before the girls realized he had more than begun.

"Minor injuries," he said. "Lucky for Mr. Keith that head wound wasn't a bit deeper. Few days' rest and quiet, and he'll be dancing. Next casualty?"

Prompted by Pilar, Gerda led him up on the roof. Howbert was still unconscious. The surgeon took off the tightly cinched belt and looked at the wound. He covered it over and rose to go.

"Marvelous vitality — these old outdoor buckaroos. Not one city man in a thousand would have lasted an hour. Next casualty?"

"Gailor and Butch — in the bunk room, doctor — leg and arm," said Tyrrel. "I'll ask you to excuse Mrs.— Miss Keith. Dad may want to tell her good-bye."

The surgeon nodded and hastened down to his next cases. Gerda knelt to take one of the scrawny, bloodless hands of the dying man. He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"*Huh* — crack roper — son is. Got his rope on you — *huh?*"

"Yes, dad."

"Could 'a' busted you. Didn't. Gentled you — *huh?*"

"Yes, dad."

"Just like the young son-of-a-gun. You, Dick, unhitch my gun-belt."

"Here it is, dad."

"Open her."

The belt was hollow. From within Tyrrel drew a roll of bills. The look in the old man's eyes told him they were not what was wanted. He shook the belt. Out fluttered a paper folded lengthwise to make a narrow strip. It was a leaf torn from the back of a small ledger.

"Yours," grunted Howbert. "Read."

Tyrrel unfolded and looked at the paper. The old man's writing was barely legible, but its meaning went as straight to the mark as his bullets.

I wil my brand & al I got to Dik Teral of Colo he rode Stil Hel he caled me dad he meant it Elisha S. Howbert alyus Hakreyaw.

At the head of the list of seven witnesses was the name of Billy Bull.

Gerda, in turn, read the will. The date alone surprised her.

"Oh, dad! You made it the first time that Dick went back to see you."

"*A-huh.* Don't do to wait and take no chances. Might 'a' stubbed my toe and got gangrene. You can't never tell."

Tyrrel bent down to grasp the other limp hand.

"If only it had been for a longer time, dad—if I could have had a few years to be your son. Tell me, have you no relatives? I can look them up—do what's right."

"*Uh-uh*—nary kith nor kin—'cept you. Never had none—'less you might call *her* one. Just did miss marrying her. You don't need me. You got Miss Gerdy—and your Miss Flora Macintyre ma."

He smiled and sighed and closed his eyes. The low-hung sun sagged down and down, close upon the rim of the far-distant horizon. He turned a little and muttered:

"Too bad he took after One-Gun—too bad! Had to

show him — had to put my notch in his ear. Could 'a' got him dead easy when he come up out the arroyo. Mebbe I ought to done it. But he was *her* son. Too bad — too bad . . . . going to the pen. If only he'd taken after her, 'stead of One-Gun."

The murmuring lips again became silent. Another wait. The lower edge of the sun cut the horizon. He stirred a little.

"*Uh* — my rheumatiz is tuning up. It's a-going to rain . . . . rain. The grass'll always be green and fresh for you, son — for you and Miss Gerdy. If you don't mind, you might make his middle name Howbert. . . . ."

Again a silence. The fiery disc in the west was now more than half under. The last whispered words were so faint that Gerda had to bend very close to hear them.

"Plant me 'longside your pa, Miss Gerdy. I wouldn't mind siding Apache at trail's end."

The sun sank. So very gentle was the end that Gerda could not tell when came the last feeble flutter of the heart. But Tyrrel could have sworn it was at the very moment the rim of the sun went under. Jacarilla had said, sundown.

Gerda pulled the blanket up over the gray head. Tyrrel drew her to her feet. Hand in hand they stood gazing into the gold and scarlet dazzle of the sunset.

"A man," said Tyrrel — "a man of the West — an American — a free American. Wronged, he did wrong. But he turned to the right. Lied about through all the years, he lived square and true to the best of his lights. He was white."

Gerda's free hand went up on Tyrrel's straightened shoulder.

"I know another man who was wronged and ridiculed and lied about. He held to the right throughout it all. He's free, white and American. He has saved me from myself, this man whom I love."

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